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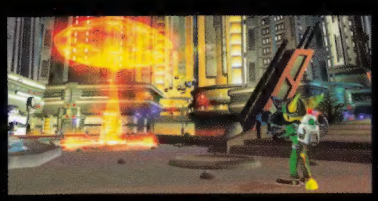
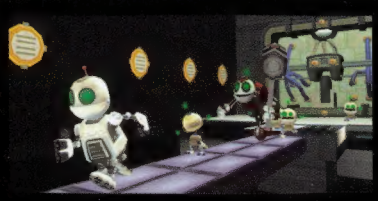
Prince of Perisa: The Sands of Time
Final Fantasy X-2
Need for Speed Underground
Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy

Kya: Dark Lineage
I-Ninja
PLUS: An interview with Reloaded's Keymaker

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TEEN
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PlayStation.2

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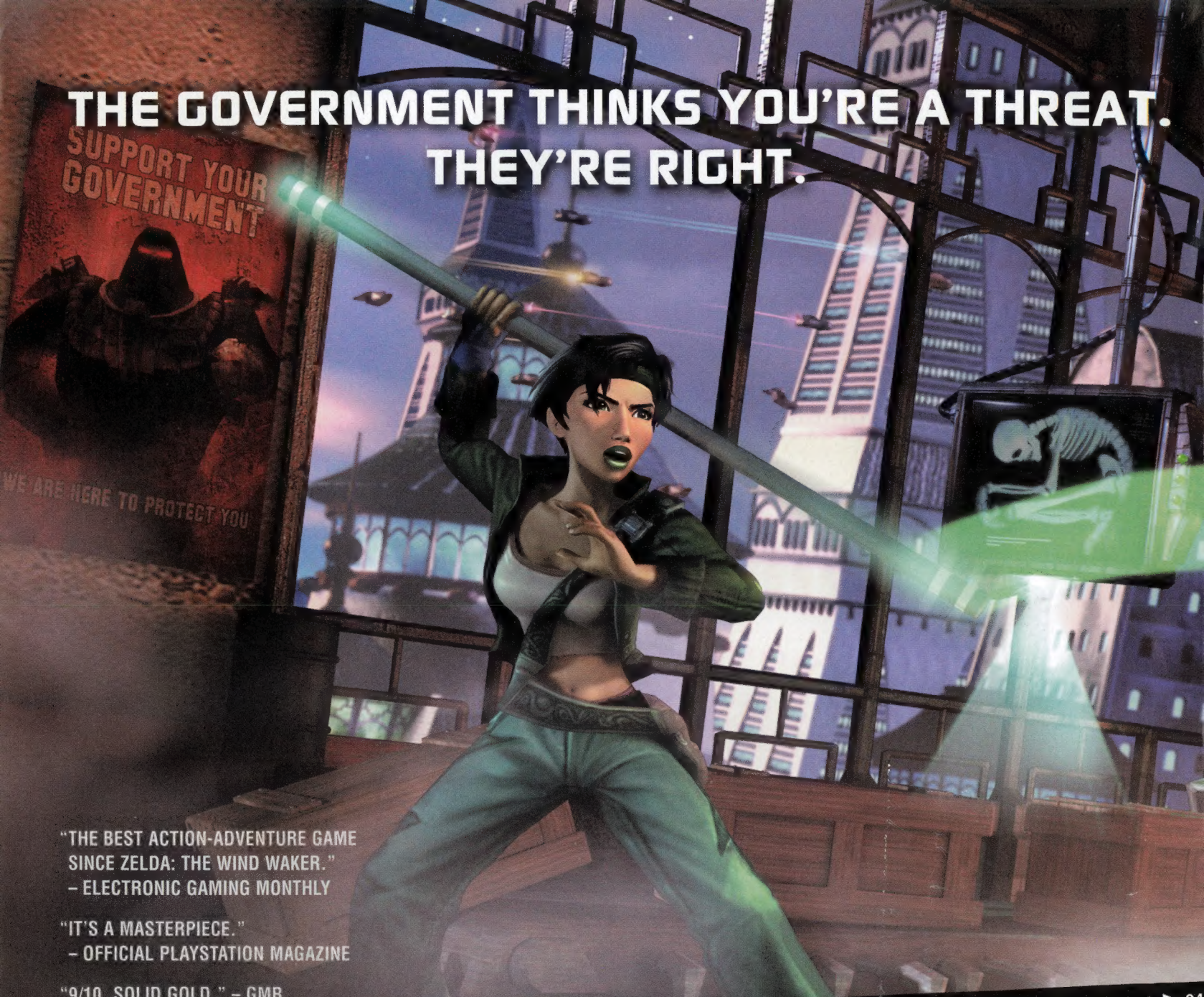

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Big Game Hunting

It seems like such a short time ago that we were putting the finishing touches on our first issue, yet here we are, two years into our unique publishing adventure. Although I've been in video game magazine publishing for some 10 years, I can't remember a 4th quarter as sopping with great games as this one, or a more exciting time to be, or become, a gamer.

There is trouble afoot, however, as a growing trend that's been playing in the background of the industry has begun to actually rear its ugly head and control what you play, and this, my friends, is a very bad thing. Case in point: Metal Slug 3, once destined for the U.S. via the PS2, now floats in limbo because Sony's approval process has stretched beyond quality control to content control. The fact that this is one of the most legendary 2D series ever, with a rabid fanbase, waiting with arms outstretched, cannot overcome the fact that the people who decide what we play to a great extent don't play video games or have any history beyond recent patterns of branding and sequels controlling the limited shelf space available, which itself has become a sea of lobbying to get a title to market. The video game delivery vehicle seems to be stuck in traffic and with so many games coming out and waiting to break through, the bottleneck is only going to get worse. Either that or controls will get even more stringent—all bad things for an industry that thrives on new ideas and innovative thinkers. The people putting in the hours, making games are getting pushed farther into the background, as buyers and marketers begin to tell them what to make. Scary. The indy side of gaming is already all but dead; if they stunt new ideas in favor of "sure things," well, that would be bad.

Getting back to Metal Slug 3... I can't help but think that of the millions of people who got into gaming after 2D had died, many might not think it's the next big thing. After all, they still can't match the majesty of hand-drawn visuals in 3D, and the games are simple and straightforward with an emphasis on mood, art, and pure dexterity...all the things that make gaming great. Look at Symphony of the Night—one of the sole 2D PS games to arrive in the U.S.—and look what it was able to achieve. In fact, as much as I love Lol, I'll bet that a Symphony of the Night 2 in 2D would sell double. So, what are these executives thinking as they swipe their pens across our future enjoyment? Job security! And you know what? F that. If you want job security, go be a telemarketer (can't seem to shake them) and leave the games market to the people who built it: gamers!

As strange as this might sound (and I never dreamt I'd be saying this), Microsoft may be our savior in all of this. That's right. Currently, of the big three publishers, Microsoft's door is open the widest, and management not only knows games but has direct on-campus access to some of the most hardcore gamers around. How do you think we got Vince? Clayton Kauzlaric shopped Vince around like crazy before landing on Microsoft's doorstep where he expected to be bounced as soon as they saw that his lead character was a 10-inch-high smart-mouth voodoo doll...yet here I am, staring at the plush doll Microsoft had made in his honor, and there are already rumblings of a possible sequel. Perhaps SNK's next stop should be the Xbox as well, and so on. Inadvertently, Sony could very well make the Xbox the people's system, and in this industry, that goes a long way. Anyone remember when the lowly Genesis outsold the more powerful SNES? This Microsoft reminds me of that Sega, and this Sony is beginning to show shades of that Nintendo—that Nintendo which have now paid for their mistakes by losing a lead that at one time was much like Sony's now. This as the Big N prepare their next plan of attack, which, knowing Nintendo, will be bold. In the video game world, history has a habit of repeating itself and we can already see the tide, though well offshore, shifting.

So how is it that today's executives seem to step into the same holes as there predecessors? Well, because they never get to hang around long enough to see the big picture and really grow with the industry. That said, I believe Kaz Harai to be one of the past decade's most brilliant CEOs, which makes this all the more puzzling. Has the lead become so large that the Sony barge is content to set anchor? I don't know if that's such a good strategy in an industry that reinvents itself twice a decade. Sure they've got the EA coup, but any coup, as we know, is only as strong as its brands. When I started out, EA was making Zany Golf and Budokan. Someone comes along and builds a better Madden and then what have you got? Loyalty...rabid fans...us. So don't take away our 2D or quirky imports or fresh new ideas; go back to being the Sony that brought out Wild, Pure, Simple Life (aka Tail of the Sun) and re-open the gates to your kingdom.

Man, do I miss Peter Moore...by now, Sega was to be every hardcore gamer's safe haven, and Japan pulled the plug before the master plan was complete. But wait. Isn't he at...Microsoft, along with Nintendo's former resident guru, Ken Lobb, and Rare? Hmmm. Tell me this isn't getting good, people.

For the time being I've got so many great games stacked up in front of me, it'll take weeks of straight gameplay to catch up in time for the year in review and I'd like it to stay this way. I wouldn't mind a little 128-bit-style 2D either...

My concerns may seem a bit misplaced given the amazing selection of games currently here and headed our way, but remember, these all began development a year or more ago. My concern, as always, is in regards to decisions being made right now, that will effect us in 2005 and beyond, as I hear from prospective developers and publishers how their ideas are being shot down and certain genres kicked out the door in favor of a tie-in or sequel. Do I really think things will ever get so bad that the market will be comprised of sports and movie and TV spin-offs? Honestly, no. I believe that the very nature of this business, because of its most avid users' passion, breeds reinvention and innovation. If anything, I believe that how we buy video games will break down, as it has in the music industry, because for every conglomeration of pop trash, someone will always offer an alternative to rock us. What happens the first time a developer secures their own investment and makes a great game sans all of the usual PR and marketing costs, and sells a few million over the Internet? Push these guys far enough and you breed the 800 lb. gorilla that eventually comes and eats you.

Now give me my damn Metal Slug! =D

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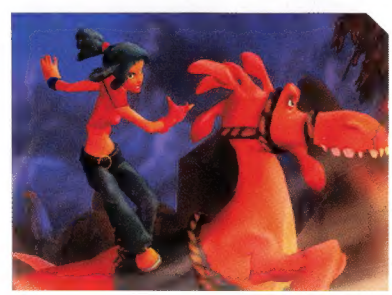

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Back... in black.

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THE KING OF FIGHTERS 2000
THE KING OF FIGHTERS 2001
FATAL FURY
THE KING OF FIGHTERS
episode 6
episode 7
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PlayStation 2

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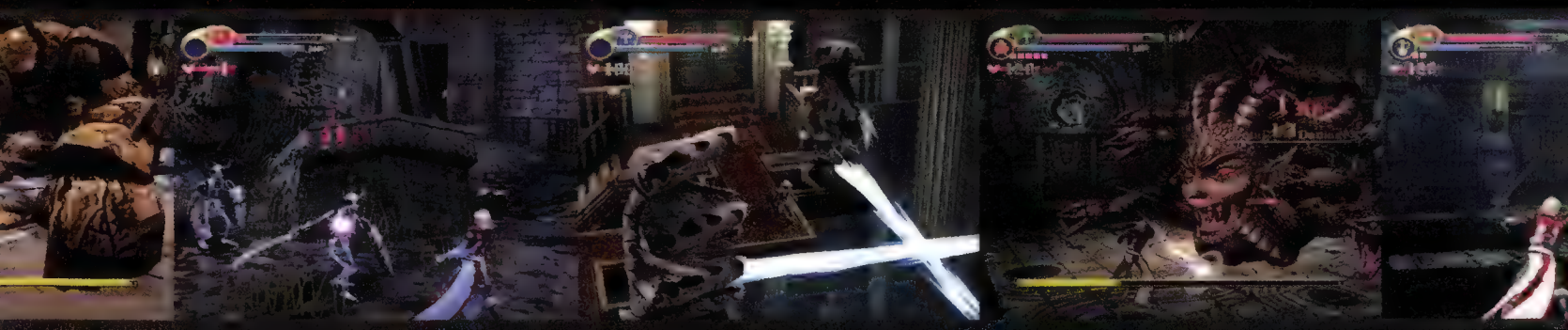

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playback

letters@playmagazine.com

Word to Konami

I suggest we draft a constitution for software publishers. And somewhere between "no tampering with translations" (also known as the Working Designs clause) and "no auto-jumping outside of Zelda" (the Halverson act of 2003) would be this:

"Companies who are in possession of classic games are required to release perfect versions of said games on capable hardware."

Then we could drag Konami out in chains.

Let me clarify: I love Konami. They've made some of the best series in gaming history. I can't fathom what my life would have been like without Castlevania III back in the day. But if any company has shirked their duty regarding classics, it has been the house that Belmont built.

Speaking of which...where is my perfect version of the Castlevania arcade game [Haunted Castle]? To date, it has never been released on a home console. What about the arcade-perfect versions of Contra and Super C? Even the GBA could easily handle such a load. Throw the TMNT arcade game (nothing could be more timely) on a collection disc and watch the money roll in.

And that's just the arcade games. Imagine a classics line similar to what Capcom did with their Generation line. A Kojima collection (Metal Gear, Policenauts, Snatcher), Castlevania series, Contra, Goemon, maybe cull some of their top-shelf shooters for a disc as well...why hasn't this happened already? The hardware's more than adequate, the conversion would be easy, and all these big-name titles would guarantee sales. C'mon Konami, you owe it to the masses. After Konami, we could move on to Sega...

Take it easy,
Zach Lamson

This and the Policenauts petition should get Konami's attention. We'll keep forwarding your request.

No more Mr. Nice Guy

I am an avid reader of your magazine and my **play** subscription is perhaps one of my most prized possessions. As of late I have noticed that there has been a tone throughout the magazine that can be best characterized as "anti-GTA"—a reactionary tone to the excessive amounts of violence and, to a lesser extent, sex being used to market video games. As someone who has been gaming for the past 18 years pretty much continuously, I feel that the Grand Theft Auto games are not all bad, and that guns, explosions and prostitutes were not the only, or even the primary, driving force behind their popularity.

People seem to have forgotten that video games have been intertwined with fantasy and violence for decades now. The technology wasn't to the point where life-like violence could be depicted in real time, and a sampling of great games from the 8- and 16-bit eras (Contra, Castlevania, Zelda, Double Dragon, Doom, Descent) all featured aggression to some extent. More than anything else, games have been a way to manipulate virtual environments. Ideally, every intentional move with a controller would correspond with some change in the video game environment, and in this manner we come to love video games. For this reason I love Tomb Raider (I and II) and Super Mario, because they rewarded you for exploring the game's environment and provided you with logical methods for changing it. The games in the GTA series have pushed us closer to that ideal—free-form gameplay—and now other games are allowing open-ended progression and rewarding exploration in interactive environments (i.e. Simpsons: Hit & Run). I can only hope that this trend continues, as developers continue to provide gamers with fantastic and original experiences.

I love this magazine because it is intelligently written and assembled in a beautiful manner. However, I hope that *play* continues to serve as an open-minded forum for game lovers everywhere, with guilty (and not so guilty) pleasures.

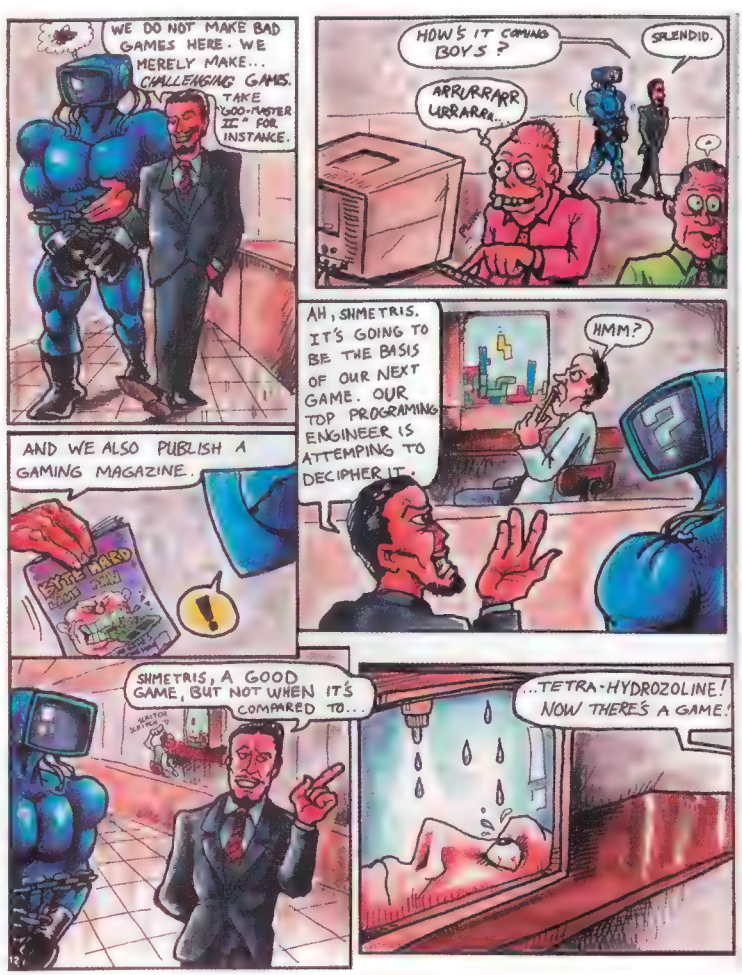
-Lawrence

It's impossible not to enjoy the likes of GTA. I think what bothers us is that it gets credit above and beyond what's necessarily due because the band wagon is so roomy, while a lot of other great art goes unnoticed. You can't miss on The Simpsons: Hit & Run either; that's an instant classic.

Almost Famous

Do you guys know that you're famous? I was at the movies the other day watching *Runaway Jury*, which, by the way, is a great movie, when to my surprise I saw your magazine in the movie. I was wondering if you guys endorsed it or not. I think it's great that you're getting this exposure. You have a really good magazine and more people need to know that you're out there. I'm big into anime and video games and your magazine is very informative. I've been with you since the beginning. Keep up the great work.

We had no idea until the previews hit. It appears one of our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HOW'S IT COMING BOYS?
SPLENDID.
ARRURRARR URRARR...
AH, SHMETRIS. IT'S GOING TO BE THE BASIS OF OUR NEXT GAME. OUR TOP PROGRAMING ENGINEER IS ATTEMPING TO DECIPHER IT.
HMM?
AND WE ALSO PUBLISH A GAMING MAGAZINE.
SHMETRIS, A GOOD GAME, BUT NOT WHEN IT'S COMPARED TO...
...TETRA-HYDROZOLINE! NOW THERE'S A GAME!

Notice the panel in the lower right. Reader Greg B. unearthed the inspiration for one of the Wario Ware mini-games in an old issue of GameFan.

favorite actors John Cusack reads the mag...pretty cool.

Wolfinger props!

I don't know if this has been pointed out by any other fiend yet, but it seems the Wario Ware designers owe a small shout out to Terry Wolfinger. While perusing my old stack of GameFans searching for lost classics to download for my emulation collection, I did a double take on "The Adventures of Monitaur" in Volume 1, Issue 5. Check out the bottom right corner of page 12. Oh yeah, "Tetra-Hydrozoline!" Now there's a game!

Later,
Greg B.

P.S. Those LandStalker spreads still make me drool!

-Bah, you made me dig out Landstalker again! Hope Terry sees this.

Online Emotions

Hello Dave and all at **play** magazine! I wanted to write a short response to your feelings about online gaming and share some of my thoughts on the matter as well. As a former manager at a local Electronics Boutique, I have encountered a variety of outlooks and feelings on the subject of online gaming and have heard very legitimate debates to both sides of the issue. I too would rather "progress and adventure than shoot non-stop" or drive continuously to the open hoop for yet another glorified dunk and have had many people ask why I have yet to become involved in the online gaming experience.

For me, it is the lack of any "emotional" experience or attachment to characters that I am playing with or against. I have dabbled in Everquest and Star Wars Galaxies, as well as a few rounds of Madden and Wolfenstein, to name a few, but none of them left me with the overwhelming sorrow that I felt at the end of Final Fantasy X, for example. And why is this? A good question. I don't think that the single-player experience will ever be bested by online gaming either, in large part because of the difficulty in trying to tie a deep and involving story around the online experience. After investing hours in Final Fantasy X, I became so enthralled with the story that its characters were experiencing that I felt in many ways that I was living it with them. Games like Skies of Arcadia, where over time you begin to develop a bond with its characters that ultimately gives you gaming experiences you'll never forget. That's why I started playing games and will continue to and I think it's something that is missing in today's online games.

Obviously online games will continue to improve and evolve, but I wonder if they will ever meet the scope and value of the single-player game. The gaming industry as a form of entertainment offers something for everyone and there will always be a demand for online games, but for me, I am content to sit back and lose myself in a story and world that has been carefully crafted to offer me an escape from reality, where I can meet engaging characters and join them in their journeys as the story unfolds in front of me. An experience that provokes anger, perhaps, or sorrow and happiness and pulls at every emotional string within me. The emotional element, a very underrated aspect of modern game design.

Thanks for listening and enjoy the games!

Matt K.

Clanking Ratchet

Don't get me wrong, I am excited as heck for R and C: Going Commando. But, I just need to raise a concern of mine. It bothers me to read all this praise from the press and from Mr. Price himself about the game being revolutionary because they are tossing in RPG elements. In the latest issue of your mag, Mr. Price states in an interview, "we hadn't seen any other characters that had the ability to grow in a platformer." Well, if you ask me, just letting the character gain more hit points through experience isn't really all that revolutionary. Maybe their team should actually do some minor research before making comments such as this. Is it just me, or wasn't the RPG+platformer completely introduced and blown out of the water waaaaay back in the dark ages of 1997 with Castlevania: Symphony of Night? And, to a degree far and beyond just simply allowing the character to gain more hit points. The glory continued with three successive GBA Castlevanias of a similar ilk. Come on...look around you, Insomniac. Again, I loved the first R and C, and am anxious for the next. I just busted out laughing finally after hearing Mr. Price himself spout about their "innovation." I had to communicate.
Thanks for the ear.

Justin L.

"Obviously online games will continue to improve and evolve, but I wonder if they will ever meet the scope and value of the single-player game."

Mr. Perfect

Is this the Postmeister? I've a question I've often wanted to ask a person who's played many games and has good taste. Have you ever heard of a video game, specifically of the Japanese RPG sort, that offers what I call a "perfect game mode"? In such a mode a disinterested user simply lets the game play automatically to mathematical perfection for observational pleasure. I see a kind of mechanical beauty in such an idea, and, anyway, I've always felt that playing RPGs was kind of like watching a movie and taking a math test at the same time.

(I feel the need to attach the following piece of an IM conversation I was having with a friend so that my question sounds less "crazy":)

me: does this [email] sound okay?
friend: it's good
friend: just sounds crazy
me: does it?
friend: they're gonna write back, "the point is to play it yourself"
me: i'll attach this piece of the conversation as a P.S. then
friend: leave my SN out?
me: okay
me: but rpgs are already so mechanical. all you do is go through the
movements and it's like unlocking a long, drawn out movie
friend: we've had this discussion...bringing it up for Phantasy Star?
me: and i won.
friend: heh; alright

Thanks,
Matthew

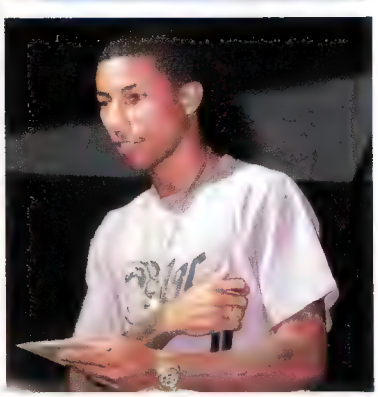
No, you're definitely crazy, and comin' from the Postmeister that's something. Simultaneously watching a movie and taking a math test is considered torture throughout Turkey.

On the scene

Playstation 2 Third Anniversary Party

Celebrities turned up the heat in LA to show their support for Mark Wahlberg's Youth Foundation and, of course, play a little PlayStation 2. With over-the-top entertainment provided by Ludacris, Pharrell Williams and the legendary DJ Grandmaster Flash, $20,000 was donated by Sony in the name of PlayStation 2 to Wahlberg's charity, the Mark Wahlberg Youth Foundation. It was good fun for a great cause.

Hollywood's elite turned out, including Vin Diesel, Orlando Bloom, Mira Sorvino and (naturally) Mark Wahlberg himself. Amidst the cocktails, food and conversation, **play** found out that...well, we didn't really find out anything, but here are some fascinating celebrity photos and quality quotes.



What they are playing...

Donnie Wahlberg – "I've been playing a lot Soul Calibur 2 with my son. He made me get all versions, Xbox, PS2 and GameCube. He likes to play with Link; I like to play with Spawn. Spawn's my man! I had to get the book that teaches you the moves and everything."

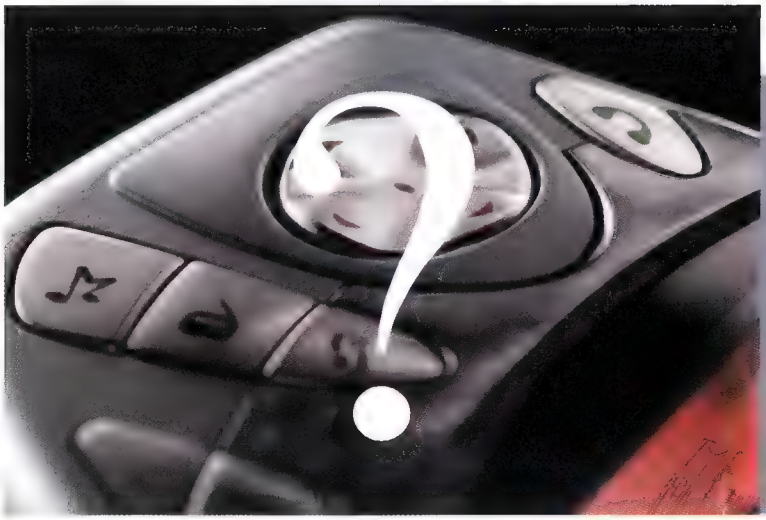
Pharrell Williams – "It's all about Madden, man. That game is dope."

Shannon Elizabeth – "I'm playing my game Everything or Nothing, of course!"

Christian Slater – "I wish I had more time. I hear there is a new Medal of Honor. That might be cool."

Jason Statham – "I've been a FIFA fan for years and I'm looking forward to the new title coming up. And, of course, I love driving games. Gran Turismo 4 looks amazing!"

Clockwise from top middle: Don Cheadle, Chris Kattan, Cole Hauser and Christian Slater, Pharrell Williams, Donnie Wahlberg, Shannon Elizabeth and Mark Wahlberg and Mira Sorvino. Center: Crispin Glover.



N-Gage: Hit or Miss?

Conflicting reports on the success of Nokia's portable system

Konami: Coming to America

As far as Konami is concerned, the future of video gaming lies in America. To that end, the company has decided to move the headquarters of its video game division from Japan to Los Angeles, California. Now known as Konami Digital Entertainment Inc.—and located in Fox Plaza Tower of *Die Hard* fame—the entity will essentially continue to function as it did before, only now a bit closer to the action. "We believe that Los Angeles is the ideal location for strengthening Konami's content business strategy," said Kazumi Kitaue, CEO and Executive Corporate Officer of Konami's Computer & Video Games Business, in a press statement. "This move will provide us with the proximity to the partners that will allow us to maintain and expand Konami's position as a front runner in the digital entertainment industry, and lead to further growth in Konami's global business." Meanwhile, Konami's development studios, such as Konami Computer Entertainment Japan and Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, will remain in their respective locales. Konami of America has also been renamed Konami Digital Entertainment America, but will continue to function in its previous capacity of localizing and releasing Konami's products in the U.S. As far as gamers are concerned, these changes will probably be unnoticeable except for new names on the box. But what does it mean for Konami's executives? A much shorter trip to E3.

Bow before Konami's new logo! Wait...it looks just like the old one...only with "Digital Entertainment" slapped on the end.

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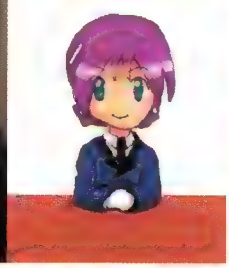
SOCOM II
U.S. NAVY SEALS

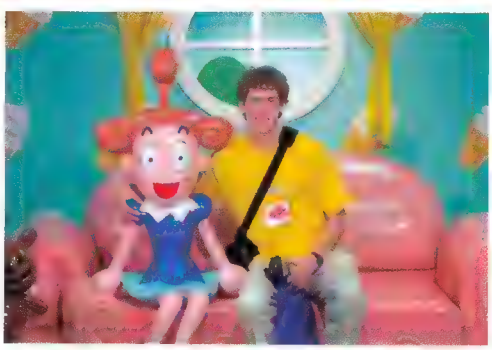
Anime Train

The ultimate vacation

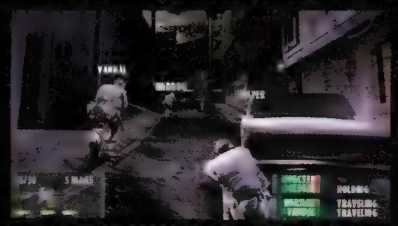
Digital Manga, Inc. and H.I.S. International Tours have teamed up to create every anime fan's dream vacation: the ultimate Pop Japan Travel tour. In additional to experiencing historical landmarks, participants will visit the hottest pop culture spots like Odaiba, Kichijoji, and get an exclusive backstage pass to some of the most famous anime studios in Japan. "We really wanted to make something unique out of this project," says Isaac Lew from Digital Manga. "We strongly believe that the Pop Japan Travel tourists will really have a great experience from our services." Besides outstanding hotel, tours, and transportation accommodations, bilingual travel coordinators are on board to assist with any questions or concerns, and breakfast and additional "special meals" are also included, designed to provide the local tastes of Japan by dining at a typical ramen restaurant, eating "kaiten sushi" (sushi served on a conveyer belt) and more. The highpoint is, of course, in the exclusive behind-the-scenes look at the booming business of Japanese anime and manga while visiting some of Japan's most prestigious anime production companies. "From anime fan to Japan fan, this tour has been specifically designed to fit everyone's needs and interests," said Satoru Amano, the director of operations of H.I.S. International Tours. "Pop Japan Travel prides itself on creating a tour like no one has seen before, at an extremely affordable price." For information on upcoming tours, check out www.popjapantravel.com/about.html

Here, anime artists fall behind schedule answering questions like "What's an OVA?" Of course, we jest.



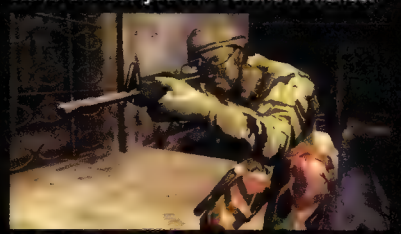


Step into the boots of a SEAL team in SOCOM II: U.S. NAVY SEALs and face the ultimate challenge: urban combat.



Developed in association with the U.S. Navy SEALs, SOCOM II is close-quarters combat at its most realistic. Invisible snipers lay in wait. Enemies lurk around every corner. And every civilian could be a friend or foe. Stealth is your greatest weapon.

Wage urban war in single-player mode. Or go online and play with and against up to 16 total players. Either way, a SOCOM-compatible headset will help you communicate and work together as a team. Remember, together you stand. Divided you don't stand a chance.



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NYKO Online Gamer's Ultimate Fantasy: Expand Your Gaming Territory!
Featuring the Air Flo BLAST Mini Game

Start Date:
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End Date:
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The Wireless Net Extender is the ultimate hook up for any online gamer's system and NYKO is dedicated to bringing online gamers more of this holiday season's best online gear and games. Enter to win at the newly re-launched NYKO.com. Expand your territory and chances of winning by signing up and playing the Air Flo Blast Online Mini Game. Get even more points and increase your chances to win by mastering all 3 levels of Air Flo Blast and challenging your friends 'cause online gaming is all about gaming with your friends with the latest high tech gear and games!

The Grand Prize winner will receive a Gaming PC from ABS, an Xbox with Xbox Live, a PlayStation 2 with the Network Adapter, a sweet sounding JBL 6.1 surround sound speaker system, the NYKO Wireless Net Extender compatible with all PCs and consoles, the iType2 controller for the PS2, the Air Flo EX for the Xbox and PS2, an Air Flo PC and Air Flo Mouse, and online games for the PlayStation2, Xbox, and PC.

Enter and play to win at www.NYKO.com

How winners will be announced:
The winners will be announced online at NYKO.com on in Feb 2004

Grand Prize:
JBL 6.1 Soundsystem SCS160SI
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Gaming PC by ABS
NYKO Wireless Net Extender
NYKO iType2 Controller
NYKO Air Flo EX for PS2
NYKO Air Flo EX for Xbox
NYKO Air Flo PC
NYKO Air Flo Mouse

PC Games:
Call of Duty, Activision
Planetside, SOE
PS2 Games:
True Crime, Activision
THUG, Activision
Everquest: Frontiers, SOE

Xbox Games:
Rainbow Six 3, Ubi
Dance Dance Revolution, Konami
Ninja Gaiden, Tecmo

There will be prizes for Second, Third, and Runner Up placement.
Check Nyko.com for more details.

Case Closed!

Acclaim Entertainment recently announced that they and Dave Mirra, one of the world's premiere BMX dudes, have settled their differences surrounding a contract dispute between the parties (regarding none other than XXX). Mirra's lawsuit against the company was settled with no monetary or other damages being paid by either side, and Mirra will continue, uninterrupted, to be under contract with Acclaim until the year 2011. Additionally, the Acclaim has begun working on the development of a new Dave Mirra BMX video game for next-generation gaming systems, details of which will be announced shortly.

"We are pleased to have amicably resolved this matter with Dave and anxiously look forward to resuming our successful working partnership," said Rod Cousens, CEO for Acclaim Entertainment, Inc. "The Dave Mirra brand is the #1 BMX brand in the video game industry and we will continue to work with Dave to build upon our proven formula for success."

"I'm glad that this issue is behind us," added Mirra. "I look forward to working with Acclaim and to continue making the best BMX video games available for fans of the sport." Well, let's just hope he keeps his gear on.

State of Capitalism

Word is that VIS entertainment has successfully completed the financing of a funding vehicle for the development of the sequel to its million-selling game, State of Emergency. Hello, Libra! Numerous shareholders in VIS stepped up to back the new "special-function" company which will fuel the fire for State of Emergency 2, enabling VIS to complete development and negotiate terms with a publisher for a projected late 2004 release date.

"This special arrangement is a demonstration of the faith which our investors have in VIS," commented Chris van der Kuyl, president and CEO of VIS. "Now we will concentrate on bringing State of Emergency 2 to market while negotiating with publishers from a position of strength. The first game topped the UK and US charts at its launch last year and sold well in excess of one million copies. We are confident that the sequel will be even more successful." Let Libra and Sparky drive around in cars and I guarantee it!

Waxing Nostalgic
Mario and Luigi immortalized in museum display

It looks like Keanu Reeves isn't The One after all. In October, the Hollywood Wax Museum updated their famous lobby display, which at the time featured wax statues of *The Matrix* stars Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss. Replacing Neo and Trinity in the display are the most famous brothers in video game history, Mario and Luigi. The gaming duo now shares the stage with lobby mainstays *The Wizard of Oz* and *King Kong*. Wait a minute, Mario is sharing the stage with a giant ape? Anyone else getting a feeling of déjà vu?

"Pac-Man Vs." for Free

Nintendo and Namco team up to promote new version of old favorite

While it seems that many game publishers are dropping the GameCube like a bad prom date, that doesn't seem to be the case with Namco. In fact, Nintendo and Namco have teamed up to offer GameCube owners the new Pac-Man Vs. game for free. Namco will package the exclusive game with the GameCube versions of R: Racing Evolution, I-Ninja and the Player's Choice version of Pac-Man World 2.

For those who missed Shigeru Miyamoto's announcement about the game at the 2003 E3 show, Pac-Man Vs. is a brand-new multiplayer version of the arcade classic and is specifically designed to take advantage of the connectivity option between the Game Boy Advance and the GameCube. In the game, one player takes control of Pac-Man on a GBA connected to the GameCube, while the other players control the ghosts with the GameCube controllers. The Pac-Man player has a full-screen view on the GBA to help him avoid the ghosts, while the ghost players only see a portion of the maze via a split-screen on the television. Once a ghost tags Pac-Man, those players switch off and play continues. The game ends when a pre-determined point cap is reached.

No word yet on whether or not Namco will offer PS2 and Xbox owners any exclusives packaged with those systems' versions of the three games offering the Pac-Man Vs. disc.

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play games

Art: THQ's Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy

ADVENT RISING

Might the next big thing spring from a small studio in downtown Salt Lake City? Stranger things have happened...

words Dave Halverson

Every great entertainment benchmark begins with a vision—someone's interpretation, based on the last big thing, of what the next big thing might be.

Shiny Entertainment's vision of the ultimate 2D video game come cartoon, beyond the exploits of Disney—one Earthworm Jim—catapulted them into the limelight in one fell swoop, as did Core Design's vision of a big-breasted, pistol-packing Tomb Raider playing off the Indiana Jones credo. More recently, the Wachowski Bros.' vision changed cinema forever. By melding anime influence with sophisticated new techniques—actually creating new ways to shoot film—they expanded our horizons and raised the bar for an entire genre, just as Quentin Tarantino has, once again, by throwing manga-style, classic kung fu and his own burning passion for film into a big, bubbling action stew called *Kill Bill*. If Donald and Geremy Mustard of Glyphx Games have it their way, they will soon join the illustrious group of media pioneers by taking adventure gaming to the next level with their epic trilogy, Advent Rising—their vision of the ultimate video game.

The call came in early July. "Halverson, I've got these two guys, and when you meet them and hear what they have to say, and see their game, you'll want to do this cover. They're like the Wachowski Bros. of the game industry." Given that this was coming from this PR person in particular, not known for peddling anything that doesn't really deserve her (or her clients') time, I was soon on my way to nearby Santa Monica where she and Donald were in town for Advent's maiden appearance on G4, thinking, quite honestly, that, no matter how great the pitch, there was no way a first-time developer (let alone one I'd never heard of) could strike gold the first time out...not in this market. I hear about the "next big thing" at least once a week, but the reality is that for every *E.T.* there are ten *Howard the Ducks*, and for every *Finding Nemo*, a parcel of *Treasure Planet* is slowly sinking to the bottom of the barrel. Still, the prospect of something original, homegrown and groundbreaking had me intrigued, reminded of the long-lost anticipation this industry used to manufacture. I can still remember sitting at Shiny Entertainment's conference table the day Earthworm Jim went beta, invited to take him for his first spin in front of the entire staff. That feeling of a new team realizing a dream has never left me. The relationship between press and developer long severed, it doesn't happen very often these days, but when lightning does strike, I like to be close by. Heading back, having surrendered the December cover in mid-July, I felt the storm clouds brewing.

Hearing the Advent Rising vision and seeing a bit of it running on a laptop was indeed great, but it was Donald's knowledge and passion for games past, present and future, and the respect and camaraderie he showed for his team back in Utah, that really drew me in. We spoke of all the things gamers connect on: Mario, Zelda, Final Fantasy, Halo, Metroid, Ico, Jak and Daxter...excessive loading, cinemas that don't gel and take you out of the game, 2D, 3D...like one big cyber-potpourri. The interview and hands-on time was set for mid-August, the day before Orson Scott Card was to arrive to begin working on the game's dialogue, signaling the official beginning of Advent Rising's crunch time, those critical last six to eight months of development. Once we were clear, they'd be locking the place down.

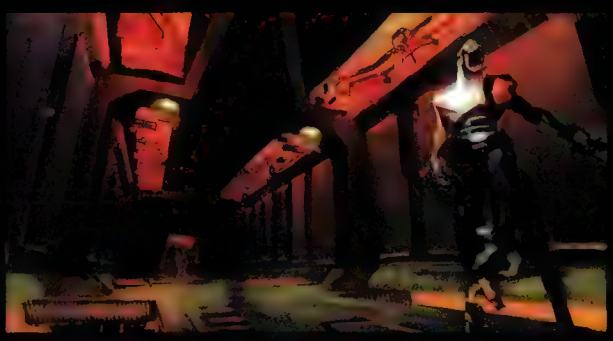
After driving around downtown Salt Lake City for 45 minutes looking for coffee (I don't know which was weirder: the fact that it took 45 minutes or that Donald didn't know where the city's sole Starbucks was), we arrived, Venti Mocha Frappucinos in hand, at the oddly charming, surprisingly tidy Glyphx Games offices. We came, we saw, and this is how it went.

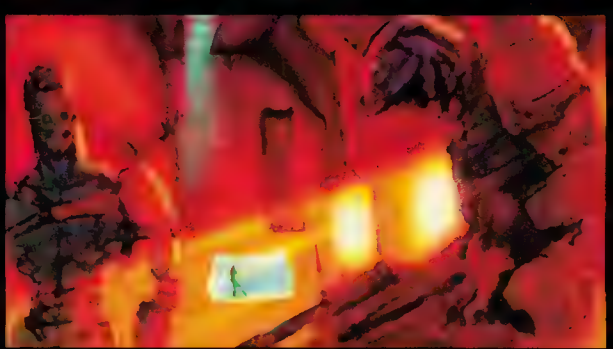
I liked Donald the moment I met him. He reminds me of David Perry circa Aladdin (Perry's still the greatest—just busier): excitable, full of passion, and completely untainted by the rigors of the industry he'll soon feel if Advent takes off. It's not every day I wake up at 4:30 AM and fly halfway across the country to see a video game, in fact, I seldom travel. Unless it's for a one-on-one of this nature, my motto is "save your money, send me the game and let me do my job." I knew this was a journey worth taking the minute Donald began to speak: "We wanted to make a game about the power of humanity. Too many games focus on all the bad things we do. At the same time, so much good is not brought forward at all. Really, the core of Advent is about the power of humanity. Humans are special, awesome. You start off as a regular guy with some cool guns, and, as you play, evolve into a god. You punch a guy and he goes flying a hundred feet. There's no longer any need for weapons; the brush of your hand sends guys flying everywhere." Sign me up.

"We wanted to make a game about the power of humanity. Too many games focus on all the bad things we do."
Donald Mustard, Glyphx Games

Gideon and Amanda recoil for any number of reasons, featured here in-game.

Card, one of the world's most renowned science fiction novelists. It's not my story. This is Advent Rising, quite possibly your first glimpse into the next big





All but dormant interstellar backwater, as the first intelligent races took to the stars and began to interact with one another. They discovered that, for the most part, they all shared a common thread—the legends of an ancient race that would one day "deliver" the universe. This race was known as the humans.

As galactic diplomacy matured and the Galactic Senate was formed, these legends continued to gain strength. As new races were discovered and introduced into the universal community, they brought with them their legends and beliefs of these fabled saviors. As time passed, these legends coalesced into a pseudo-religious philosophy that became the diplomatic undercurrent of interstellar politics.

While most citizens of the universe saw these legends as nothing more than an important unifying myth, there were many who believed the stories to be true. These believers argued that there was no way such similar legends could permeate throughout the undiscovered galaxy without at least some semblance of truth. Others acknowledged the possible existence of such a race, but saw no need for what they needed deliverance from—the galaxy was, for the most part, a peaceful place.

The Seekers alone held the key to the secret of the humans. Humanity did in fact exist, and the Seekers were doing all that they could to eradicate them. Under the guise of "benevolent explorers," they spread methodically throughout the galaxy, destroying all human life they came in contact with.

Consequently, the Seekers did in fact discover many new races and helped introduce them into the galactic arena. This served the Seekers twofold. It allowed them to constantly spread their influence and strengthen their military and civic control of the galaxy, and it allowed them to retain and magnify their image of philanthropic nobility.

The Aurelian culture was rich with the tales of humanity, and when they were discovered by the Seekers, many of their legends rekindled long-dormant ideals within the Galactic Senate. So much so that even before the Aurelians' proper introduction into the Senate, they enjoyed many of the privileges associated with universal sovereignty.

With the added insight, knowledge, and technology that interstellar society offered the Aurelians, it was not long before a group of several scholars discovered the Seekers' duplicity. The governing Aurelian body quickly and quietly investigated this information. They found that the Seekers had been responsible for the destruction of thousands of human worlds and that they had killed billions upon billions of humans. Enraged, the government formed a small covert faction within the Aurelian military to gather as much information about Seeker operations as possible. It was because of this group that Edumea (ed-oo-may-uh), a small world inhabited by humans, was first discovered and a rescue organized.

With the introduction into the Senate close at hand, and the promise of power and wealth looming overhead, many governing officials began to doubt the plan to help the humans. They argued that, if discovered, they would be completely destroyed by the Seekers. It was their opinion that in order to save themselves and insure their place in the Galactic Senate, their policy on humanity should be to simply look the other way.

With this growing dissention among the government, it was feared that the Seekers would discover the Aurelians' plans, and consequently discover the planet of Edumea. Knowing this, the Aurelian high command sent a small diplomatic force to Edumea. The humans were to be warned of their plight and aided in any way possible.

The system that Edumea resides in was once home to another human-inhabited planet. Ten thousand years before, Edagior had been a thriving planet teeming with human life. It was discovered by a passing Seeker exploration fleet and destroyed. A few humans managed to survive by building a small city in one of the larger chunks of the destroyed planet. Over time, they managed to migrate to the nearby planet of Edumea. As they terra-formed the world, life sprang anew, and the menace of the Seekers was soon forgotten.

The Beltway Colonies and Edumean homeworld have enjoyed several years of peace following two decades of violent conflict and civil turmoil. As initial steps are being taken toward healing the scars that warfare has left on their battered civilization, the Aurelians arrive. A diplomatic entourage is quickly formed by the newly established coalition government—a dozen representatives of humanity to make this pivotal first contact with an alien race. Ethan Wyeth, the world-renowned fighter pilot and war hero who was pivotal in thwarting the Beltway Colonies' massive planetside attack in the last phase of the war, is the obvious choice to pilot this vital assembly to first contact. Using his fame and influence, he has his younger brother, Gideon (the player), assigned as co-pilot for the mission.

From earliest childhood, Ethan has often relied on his brother's level-headedness and clear thinking to support him in unpredictable situations, and this will be no exception.

The Ambassador and the majority of the party have already rendezvoused on Lurium, an orbital space city. Lurium was initially constructed as a military installation during the war. This spaceport was used as a defensive countermeasure against off-world rebel colonies, as well as a staging ground for planetside operations. After the wars, Lurium grew as science teams began to inhabit the station. This gave way to a small and bustling economy as new technologies brought the hope of the possibility of interstellar travel. Once the strategic seat of power for the homeworld military, Lurium has been largely converted into a thriving trade center, a gateway to the colonies and beyond...

The Game Welcome to Advent Rising

Upon the human entourage's arrival, The Aurelians inform the ambassador of the Seekers' intentions and warn them that an attack, now that they have been discovered, is eminent. Although their arrival has set cataclysmic events in motion, it is their only hope. If the Aurelians can bring proof of human existence back to the council, they can protect their world. The news of this sends the ambassador into a panic, causing her to retreat at once back to the rendezvous on Luriam to report the unexpected turn of events. But as they are flying back—as you're flying back—the Seeker Armada folds out of space and launches an assault on the immense (it's miles long) Aurelian ship. As it explodes behind you, the shockwave tears the shuttle in half, and as the controller vibrates and begins pulling from the damage, your descent into adventure begins as the consequences of what you do from this point on will have a dramatic impact on the game.

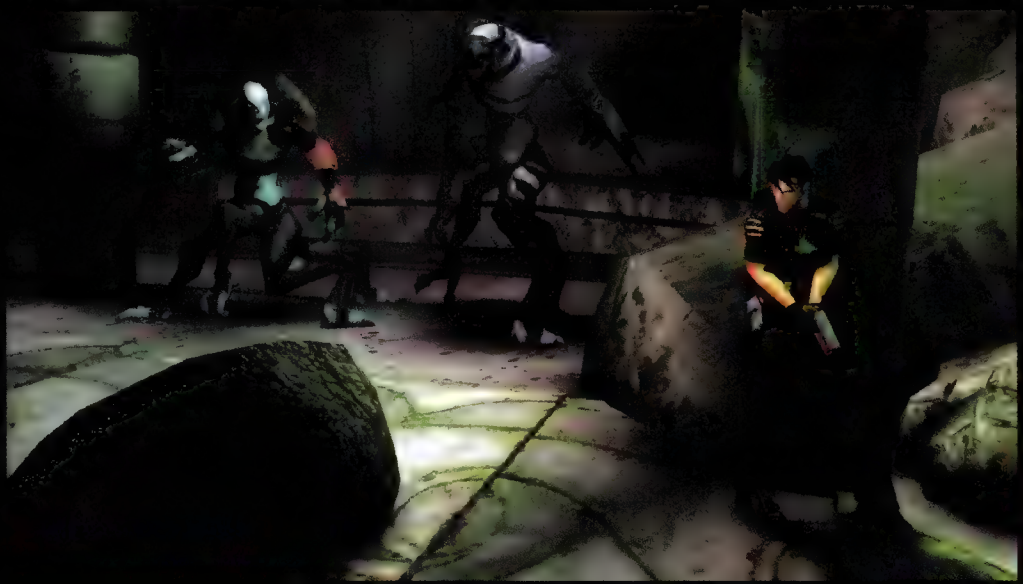
If you're able to crash land into the landing bay, all is well…or at least as well as can be expected. However, veer off course and you may hit the civic center, in which case you'll survive, but having killed innocent people. "This doesn't affect the story, but changes the way you experience the game," says Donald. So let's say you crash into the space station. As you drag Ethan from the wreckage, you see drop ships start to ascend from the armada, from which Seekers emerge walking out upright—noble creatures, looking around slowly; a magical moment—until they unfold and drop down onto all fours and begin their carnage, scooping up humans, scanning their heads and then gutting them; time for Gideon and Ethan to go.

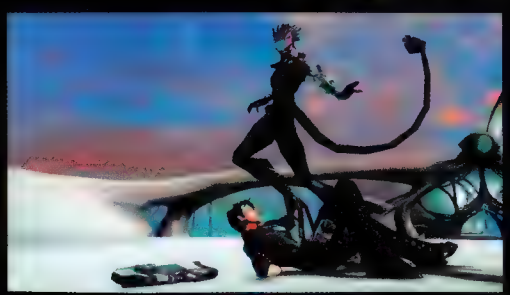
As you're making your way to the escape pod, dragging your brother behind you (you're playing this), it occurs to Gideon that his fiancé, Olivia, a renowned scientist, is working on the space station. So, leaving Ethan by the pod, you're off to find her, but by the time you return, the space station is starting to lose orbit, approaching the atmosphere, ripping apart before your eyes; time to make a choice. Yes, they're going to put you in that situation, where you have to choose who you're going to save. If you drag Olivia into the pod, as you turn, the door slams shut, leaving your brother crawling, reaching out as a seeker lifts him up and begins to scan his head when—blam!—the ship slams into the atmosphere and blows up. Cue the title screen. Who you save here will not only affect the game but the entire three-game trilogy—seriously ambitious stuff. You just played one incredible intro.

"Normally, you might find Olivia in her idling animation," Donald elaborates, speaking about how this situation might look typically. "'Oh, Gideon, thank you for saving me,'" he exclaims in a surprisingly good female voice, before continuing. "After which, she might follow you or just appear when the next destination is reached, when what you should have—will have—is Gideon running up to her, sliding in and scooping her off the ground, then—boom!—back to the gameplay. Bars don't come down depicting a cinematic moment; they're already down. This game is a movie. It defaults to widescreen. I'm big on promoting a cinematic format for game delivery."

What these guys are doing is essentially integrating the story into the fabric of the game, much like Ico, one of the games they're drawing from. Geremy elaborates on the Ico influence: "The way they did their cutscenes...the front gates open, you're running across the bridge to escape as it's crumbling behind you. Ico slips and the camera snaps down to her reaching out and grabbing him just as you see the queen slowly coming up behind her—and she drops him. It's all real-time, all in the engine; 15 seconds but such a powerful scene. That cutscene is Advent—not taking you out of the game but punctuating moments. You don't want gamers to get tired of sitting through cutscenes, mashing the start button to skip ahead—the impact is there. It's in the game."

"It starts, you play through, it ends," says Donald simply. "No load screens. We're even trying to get away from load times." The team is adopting the Naughty Dog approach to loading, where while you're watching one event transpire, the loading is going on but you never know it. Speaking of Naughty Dog, the team did "feel" tests using Jak as guinea pig—good call. Jak is the reigning king of play control. Another big influence on the brothers was Super Metroid. "Super Metroid is from a different time and mentality, but the feeling of that game is something we're trying so hard to imbue in Advent...you never stop playing this game."





"What these guys are doing is integrating the story into the fabric of the game, much like Ico, one of the games they're drawing from..."

Advent of screen captures. All of the screens contained on this spread are from the actual game.

Above and below in their upright guise—ladies and gentlemen: the Seekers.

Game design 101...and then some

I like nothing better than talking shop with game designers. As someone who plays video games every day of his life, it's like an epiphany being able to unload (and learn more) about things like blocky models, frequent load times, stunted frame rates, bad acting, cheap cinemas and all the other things I'm forced to endure in my daily routine, along with the usual "best-of" banter—comparing notes on Ico, Mario Sunshine, Metroid Prime, Halo, assorted 16-bit games, etc.—followed by my routine sermon on platformers and their importance in the world, the current bump-mapping drought, bad collision (make those feet match those inclines, people!) and me leaking everything I'm seeing, so they might get a leg up. Developers are good people. They shovel the coal that fuels this industry and, for the most part, get little in return. Your approval is pretty much their ultimate goal.

My collision sermon ignites Donald: "If I add in the little cutscene to perfectly punctuate a moment and the fingers don't plant on the ground exactly how I want to, it doesn't matter...you won't see it, but I will." No, I tell him, that's the thing; I will. "Which is why I want to go back and put all of that in, but I'm not even going to worry about it until the gameplay is perfect."

Geremy elaborates: "You pick your battles...in game design, every day we make choices. I'm choosing this instead of this...I'm choosing to have that hand there but my choosing that means that when it comes to the effect that laser has on the ground, I only get one shot at it...it's picking your battles. Look at Gideon. He takes up 25 percent of the screen and you see him all the time, so if he doesn't look good, if he doesn't play right—if we're not spending 25 percent of our time at least on him and the gameplay—it won't be worth anything. If Gideon doesn't jump right, we're screwed from the get go. If we can't make the first three hours cool, no one will play it."

Having seen the game, if they locked it down then and there, it would look better than 90 percent of what's out there, so this really resonates. Advent is taking full advantage of the Xbox hardware through some of the most visionary and talented artists working in games today, and that's the key: art. Fields of grain, objects in the world, and the way they're affected by the physics alone is astonishing. Standing Gideon next to a dune buggy, if he fires on it, it slowly shutters from the impact, while sitting in it causes one side to settle accordingly. And should he use his powers on it, he can send it flying like a feather, yet wherever it lands, it reacts with real-world physics. Advent mixes the supernatural with the natural in such a way that both look and feel completely at home in the world. It's fascinating.

"We're creating more of a graphic novel-type look for the game," says Geremy. "If you move more towards realistic, you're gonna notice more flaws...it's cool...if you try to go really photorealistic, it really limits what you can do. I, at my core, am a gesture artist; I'm not the guy who's going to do every little finished detail in the ruffle of the cloak, I'm going to make sure that the shape of the cloak flowing in the wind looks awesome. I wanna make sure that when you are in the room, shapes of the environment,

Above: The brothers animated. A rare occurence for Geremy (top left), a constant state for Donald...

the main shapes of the ships and the silhouette of the character and the guys that you're fighting compose a beautiful painting...and then it doesn't matter. The little grates on the floor and stuff like that...we save huge on our textures because you don't have to be as high resolution because it's more about form."

Donald punctuates the thought: "Our game will be as fun as Halo—in the sense that we have great AI. Our AI is smart and it's fun to play against, and our controls are tight. Our number-one goal for this game is to have tight play control and the games we look to for that are Mario, Zelda and Jak and Daxter."

Playing the Orson Scott Card card

The unsaid bond and emotion Glyphx Games are trying to incorporate into Advent Rising is a big challenge, which is why Orson Scott Card is such a big part of the equation, being the master of character development critical for pacing that he is. Plus, the way the groundbreaking author came to the project will make for some great DVD extras.

[illegible] like his on whether they were headed in the right direction. Since they figured they'd just start from the top, Geremy began searching around on the Internet for Card's email address. They found a CD for sale on eBay that claimed to have the email address of "every famous person." It was $10, so they figured they'd give it a try. Turns out, it actually had his address, and so they sent him an email informing him that they were working on a game and asked if he had some time to meet with them. Of course, they never thought they'd hear back. About six weeks later, Card contacted them and said he'd be in Utah for a book signing and could give them 30 minutes of his time. At this point, they still never thought he'd work with them...but thought they'd at least be able to get their copy of "Ender's Game" signed.

Card ended up spending four hours with them talking about their ideas for the game and afterwards told them that he was certain they had a hit on their hands and didn't need his help. He said that's exactly why he'd work with them, because, unlike with other game ideas he had reviewed, he didn't have to start over with this one—he could use what they had and just round it out to make it even better. His terms were [illegible]

[illegible]

So who are these guys?

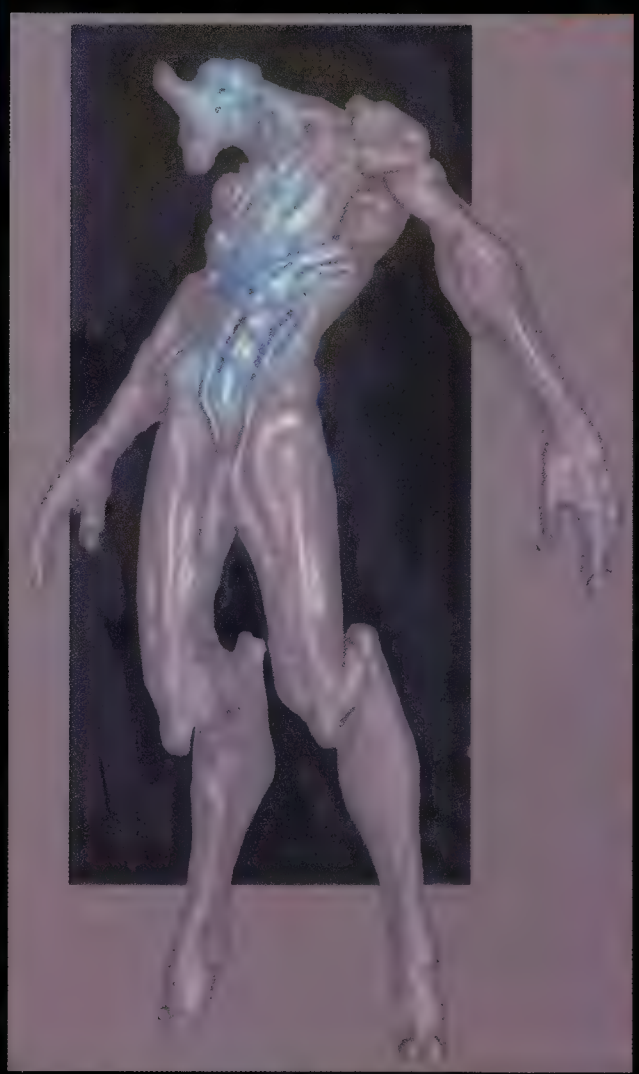
Chances are, if you've been playing games for any number of years, you've seen Glyphx's work...outside the box, literally. They've been designing box art, building cinemas and assisting game developers for years. Advent is the second tier in their plan for global domination, to be followed by the motion picture trilogy that, given the Orson Scott Card card, could very well become the next *Star Wars* if the game sets the wheels in motion. At this point, we'd been throwing around legendary game titles like so much R&D, which it so happens is the exact formula for success. Teams that draw on the best experiences and set out to innovate on them always make the best games. But this is a first-time developer literally talking about pushing the medium forward. So I had to ask: what makes you think you can pull this off? To which Donald replied without hesitation, "We have the best game development team in the world. I really believe that. I believe the guys that we've got individually are phenomenal at what they do. Our lead modeler is an unbelievable modeler. He can model anything perfect, nail the design on anything he's given like absolute—and he can do it with 1000 less polys than anyone else while capturing the gestures and everything else we're doing at the same time because he's a great concept artist and he understands game design. And our texture mappers: we have got the best texture mappers on the planet—they're phenomenal artists that also understand the basic principals of film and video games."

He moves onto his brother Geremy. Having an older brother myself, it's touching how well they work together and accent each other—Donald the animated visionary and Geremy the mastermind that absorbs it and spins it into gold. "Geremy is a really, really smart guy... What Geremy has that I don't see in other programmers...at the end of the day he can paint really good, he's a modeler, he's an artist—he understands art. We can communicate in creative meetings these ideas on a level that I don't think a lot of people have. There's not this dichotomy between programmer and artist."

The same seems to apply for the entire team. "While we are very creative," Geremy elaborates, "our key guys can be very technical. Okay, we want this look: how do we get it? It's all smoke and mirrors: how do we bend the technology to fit our vision? And that is fundamentally our greatest strength. To take any idea we've got and push it beyond what other people are doing. We've worked together so long we don't even need to talk half the time. We've become like this one über-person."

Perhaps Donald sums it up best when he says: "A game should be an experience, not something you watch. It's all about using the polygons that we have to create the art that we need. In Advent Rising, every level is the best part of the game."

Based on what I've seen of the game, and the fantastic people I met at Glyphx Games, I can't imagine Advent Rising being anything less than the epic about the power of humanity that Donald is almost willing into fruition. At the very least, if 10 percent of their dedication, love of gaming and undying desire to entertain comes through, Advent Rising will live on in that purgatory of greatness where games like Ico and GunValkyrie reside, but something tells me that because of their film savvy and marketing background, this one will go all the way. Either way, it's a win-win for gamers everywhere.



The obligatory concept art—decidedly alien.

Deus Ex
Invisible War

An ambitious attempt to give new meaning to the words "free roaming"

words brady fiechter

Stationed in the depressive confines of Upper Seattle, Alex D is an operative-in-training at the corporate-controlled Tarsus. When the facility is ostensibly attacked by a terrorist cell, Alex D is forced to flee the area and meet with one of her superiors for transport into a less volatile sector. Before she can find a way out, before the game reveals the core of its intentions, what starts as a subtle mystery ignites into a firestorm of conflict and chaos, with a growing string of very ambiguous clues as to the source.

One goal turns into five, which leads to a handful of others, which fold back on themselves and reveal more questions, concerns and potential threats. The game is meant to provide an open world of possibilities, providing you with several means to several ends. There's never one set way to accomplish a task, and you may be blinded to what consequences your actions will bring next.

From the start, Alex D is your hero to unconventionally mold: choose either a male or female persona and discover accordingly different circumstances to tackle. What's intrigued me early on is just how much freedom this shadowy world grants your mode of exploration. And the way the game makes you intently ponder your actions is a rare, engaging stage for deep escape. One example of an early predicament: infiltrate the penthouse suite of an important dignitary. Do you pay off a janitor to grab a key to the back door? Does it make more sense to convince the shady guy in Club Vox to provide access? Could you just force your way in somehow? Is it even worth the trouble altogether, with so many other things to attend to?

Some of the tasks must be accomplished to move forward; some are secondary and exist, say, as rewards and a chance to pick sides. Implications carry unusual weight, and make you really think about the morality of your choice. Should you destroy a rival merchant's coffee supply to appease a shop in Upper Seattle and cash in on some much-needed credits? Would you play the role of killer and off a lawyer who is accused of setting up the nightclub owner for the fall, pulling in a nice reward and VIP status to the club you're in need of fully accessing?

Maybe you'll play the game without taking a life. One unique aspect of Invisible War is that a lot of the conflict comes from Bots that patrol the area, monitoring your every move and maintaining order. There are numerous ways to take them out, circumvent their line of sight, or simply avoid them altogether by finding another room to drop into. No matter what the obstacle you face, relying on your numerous biomodifications and enhanced abilities provide a tailored key to unlock the door of your choosing. **play**

system: xbox, pc
developer: ion storm
publisher: eidos
available: december

The atmosphere in this game is off the charts, with darkness spread across the world, pierced by gorgeous lighting.

There are some individuals who would prefer that we not publish a game like Go! Go! Hypergrind.

Let them vent.

"Do you like skating? If you do then Go! Go! Hypergrind should rocket to the top of your "Must buy" list. You won't be disappointed."
- Nintendophiles

"Go! Go! Hypergrind is fast, fun, kooky, and it looks great."
- IGN.com

Skate as one of 12 crazy, cool competitors, designed by SPUMCO, the world-famous animation studio responsible for The Ren & Stimpy Show and The Ripping Friends!

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Use the new "Negative Reaction" system to score insane points and begin your rise to stardom! Chain multiple Negative Reactions together with normal tricks for insane combination points!

Powerful graphics engine allows for real-time character deformation. The wacky, cel-shaded skateboarders can be subjected to numerous humiliations, such as being set on fire, flattened and covered in caca!

"...your ticket to many nights of great gaming."
- NintendoInsider.com

"...absolutely insane..." - GamesAreFun.com

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TEEN
T
Crude Humor
Suggestive Themes
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Alias

Kill bad guys, rinse and repeat

Sydney doing what she doesn't necessarily do best—not yet at least.

system: playstation 2, xbox, gamecube, pc
developer: acclaim cheltenham
publisher: acclaim
available: q1 2004

words dave halverson

We are currently experiencing a market where brands speak louder than words or originality: a largely pre-conceived retail environment where what you play is greatly controlled by people who've either never played a video game or believe that anything outside of the box belongs outside of their store. While this will likely run its course, in the meantime we're going to be seeing a lot of games like Alias—an any-man's game with a big name and pretty graphics that essentially walks you through a heavily scripted collection of scenarios in tune with the brand, while trying its best to make the stars of the game look like the stars of the show, the result of which, as always, is a mixed bag.

What's good about Alias is obvious: nice detail, solid (albeit boring) character models and, of course, solid source material—if that can be said about anything currently on network TV, which is perhaps where Alias should have stayed. At this point of development, in execution the game plays like a poor man's Metal Gear, and in a year where stealth is in abundance with such games as Splinter Cell and Rogue Ops, and adventure virtually overflowing, Sydney may be in over her head. If you're looking for a mainstream fix, however, don't touch that dial; this one comes with auto-pilot. Alias is the very definition of the strain aimed directly at people who don't want to think or be challenged—a by-the-numbers scripted yawn-fest that uses the player as a pawn to facilitate the proceedings. The action stops often for the cast to do their thing (essentially telling you what to do next, aided by a handy red directional radar also pointing the way, in case you're dumb and blind); all you have to do is toggle gadgets and smack the buttons when the game's messy fighting gets underway, and viola! Just like on TV! Or better yet, just run through the scenario to the next door or save point—piece of cake!

Elsewhere, what has the making of a solid fighting engine (the game's core element) is so far a mess of soft collision and proximity moves that slide Sydney around like a chess piece, as she defaults to the closest bad guy while dishing out a rolodex of random moves. And the lock-on is terrible; let's not even go there. The animations are nice, but the action is so disconnected and scripted it almost feels like the game is playing itself. And can we please get some token thugs that yell something besides "intruder!" all in the same voice. It's bad enough they look identical...

Okay, so this is just a preview. I even hear that Acclaim is considering pushing it back (hence the '04 release date), which is a good sign, although this game needs a lot of work. They should begin by deciding whether the primary focus is action or stealth and then do whichever correctly. From there, I know this studio has the skills... I just hope they're cheery enough about Alias at this point to apply them. **play**

"...toggle gadgets and smack the buttons when the game's messy fighting gets underway, and viola!"

OCTOBER 2003

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence

DRAKEGAME.COM

Idol

PC CD

XBOX

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Mafia

Step into the shoes of a 1930s mobster

words brady fiechter

system: xbox, playstation 2
developer: illusion software
publisher: gathering
available: january

In Grand Theft Auto, you get to bludgeon hookers. In Mafia, a sort of GTA set against a stylish backdrop resembling the gangster romance of the 1930s, there's an entire mission hinged on driving to a brothel, killing the hotel manager and then proceeding to cap a prostitute who knows too much. The level is called "The Whore."

For your next dose of serious adult gaming, consider the third-person action of Mafia, a PC transplant with some extremely interesting qualities already in its corner. The game tells the story of Tommy Angelo, a former cab driver who is unwittingly dragged into his new family of brutal crime, the Salieris. There's a lot of emphasis placed on expanding a complex plot, with long scenes of dialogue setting up several types of scenarios, from driving to shootouts to hand-to-hand brawling and a little adventuring in between. The fairly linear gameplay path you'll forge through the detailed city feels open enough within the content of the storytelling, offering a good deal of variety

"The spirit of the time period definitely lends Mafia a freshly appealing edge..."

and the ability to pick the locks of tons of cool antiquated rides, which can be stored in a central garage. I've only seen a few interiors of Mafia's stylish setting, but so far they all look superbly faithful to the style of the time, richly detailed and boldly colored.

The spirit of the time period definitely lends Mafia a freshly appealing edge. We've all become dully accustomed to the joys of a shotgun and adrenaline rush of a chase down alleys and side streets, but now we get to pack Luparas—Italian sawed-offs—and corner in giant shoeboxes with bicycle-spoke wheels. The superb score, which won an award on the PC, is a huge lift to the mood of the moment.

Mafia is an enticing experience in its preview state, even if there isn't much to tool around with yet. Impressive emoting from the grandly textured characters, smart dialogue, a unique setting and solid gameplay scenarios are immediate standouts to a game I'm quite looking forward to. **play**

The proper stylings of the time have received careful attention.

Counter-Strike™ and Xbox *Live*.
A match made in "holy-*#!%-did-you-see-that" heaven.

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Intense Violence

Microsoft game studios

VALVE

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XBOX LIVE

COUNTER-STRIKE

XBOX

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xbox.com/counterstrike

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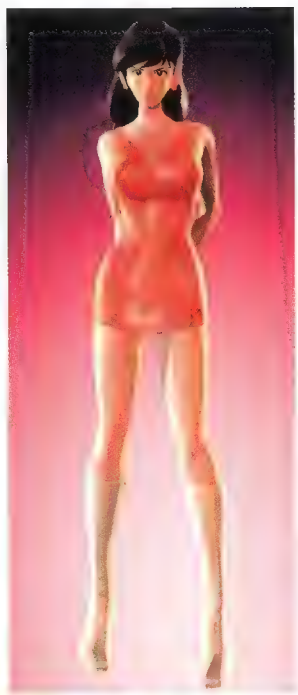
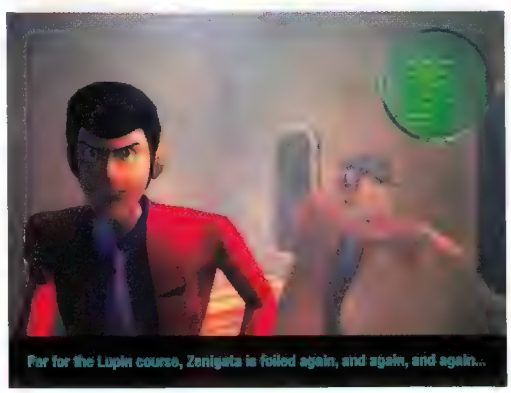


Lupin the Third

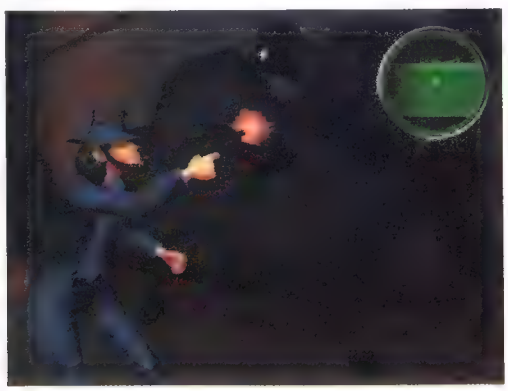
Treasure of the Sorcerer King

system: playstation 2
developer: bandai
publisher: bandai
available: february

dave halverson



For for the Lupin course, Zenigata is foiled again, and again, and again...



"...it's been a while since I've played an import with as much panache as this..."

Anime-based games are subject to double scrutiny: judged on the usual essentials and, moreover, their anime merits—how religiously they stick to the material—the end result is usually double trouble. Luckily for *Lupin* fans, Bandai gets both right, nailing the look and the gameplay in Treasure of the Sorcerer King. It's been a while since I've played an import with as much panache as this, and I must say it couldn't have come at a better time. Not only do I dig Lupin, but it's nice to play something so completely different.

Besides being a loopy, conniving, infinitely lucky, womanizing wolf in sheep's clothing, Lupin is, above all, a master thief, skilled in the ways of deception. Translating this into a gamescape couldn't have been an easy task, but Bandai does so with surprising adeptness. While he's not the most graceful video game star to come down the pike, Lupin's certainly perfectly tailored for the game at hand, which is decidedly action/stealth with a mega-dose of mind-bending riddles on the side and creamy jazz extracted right from the show. Not stealth as in Splinter Cell, but stealth as in Lupin, and not mind-bending as in cute little puzzles—mind-bending as in high-school algebra (okay, maybe not that bad). If you've ever dreamt of exploring a massive castle as the man himself, using his trademark disguises and wit to outsmart all the best security money can buy (and, of course, Zenigata, the inspector whose life ambition is to capture him), then you're going to love this game. And in the case you haven't, well, go get yourself *Castle Cagliostro* and we'll talk; either that or tune into Adult Swim. Lupin just seeps crazy cool.

You do a lot of three things in Treasure: snooping around, busting said riddles and, in the case you're discovered, administering non-lethal pain. Lupin only uses a real gun when absolutely necessary, otherwise he conks his attackers on the head with a frying pan, fires knock-out gas, or just escapes and waits for things to cool down—all of which are handled in cheeky Lupin style. The vast labyrinthine levels outside of the initial pseudo-training train heist (sandwiched between CG and real-time cinemas) incorporate every trick in the thieves' tome, as well as the opportunity to walk a mile in Jigen's shoes, Goemon's sandals and Fujiko's heels—all near-perfect 3D representations of their bad selves. Playing as Jigen is especially cool, shooting first and asking questions later, although they took away his smokes! Bad Bandai! He always has a butt in his mouth! As for Fujiko, you'll have to wait for the review. She just showed up 8 hours in, so I have yet to fondle her assets.

Accessing the map and toggling items isn't as intuitive or fast as I'm used to but otherwise this is sweet stuff—easily the best anime-based game since Ghost in the Shell for the PlayStation. It may not be the next Metal Gear, but if you're into Lupin, it's just as exciting. **play**

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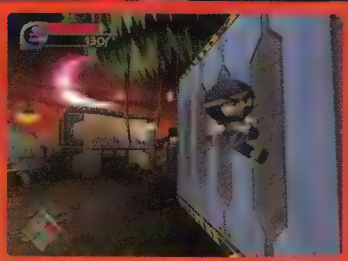
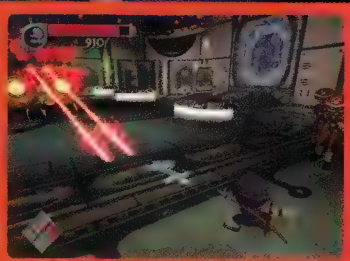
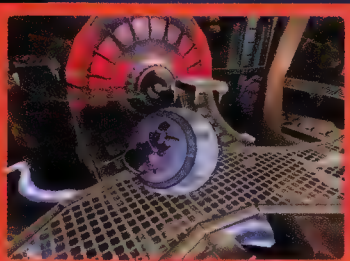


Gravity? Run up walls and tear through levels with moves only the most insane Ninja would try.



any foe that dares stand between Ninja and his missions.



grueling missions that will separate the Ninjas from the boys.

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Animated Blood
Violence

NINTENDO GAMECUBE
XBOX
PlayStation.2
ARGONAUT

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Growlanser Generations

Generating some excitement for strategy-RPG fans

words chris hudak

system: playstation 2
developer: atlus/career soft
publisher: working designs
available: 2004

If you've been craving something unique in the strategy-RPG vein, Working Designs might have just what you're looking for. Growlanser II: The Sense of Justice and Growlanser III: The Dual Darkness, quietly announced for a U.S. release some 18 months ago, have undergone many setbacks, but are finally scheduled to hit the PS2 in 2004 as a two-game set known as Growlanser Generations.

At least half the package is finished. Growlanser II, virtually done and only awaiting its complementary half, follows Wein Cruz, a young man determined to become an Imperial Knight, in a tale of friendship, deception and political intrigue that could result in the shattering of the kingdom he has sworn to protect. Growlanser II also features beautiful character designs by Plastic Little artist Satoshi Urushihara and 2D visuals filled with old-school appeal (even if they don't exactly push the PS2).

The core of the Growlanser titles is strategic RPG gameplay that's unlike anything else on the market. All the action in Growlanser takes place in pseudo-real time. Battle commands are input via a traditional menu-driven interface, then the movements and action play out on the battlefield all at once, not unlike a traditional RTS game. While the player can change commands at any time with a few button presses, it's important to keep an eye on the wait gauge for each move. An attack that takes too long to execute could mean the difference between glory and humiliation.

A system of power-boosting rings makes combat even deeper. Rings not only raise characters' stats, they allow the use of various gems, which do everything from granting immunity to the elements to bestowing new abilities, and allow for incredible customization. Better still, upon leveling up your characters, you can allocate points toward spells or innate skills and thus determine which they will master.

With branching paths, multiple endings, hidden events, unlockable secrets, an excellent translation and hours upon hours of voiceovers (many which didn't exist in the Japanese release), Growlanser II is shaping up to be a quality strategy-RPG. Growlanser III promises even more depth and exploration, and you'll even be able to upload the G2 data into G3. Growlanser Generations gives fans of the genre a lot to look forward to. **play**

Growlanser's story unfolds through hours of spoken dialogue and gorgeous character portraits like this.

"The core of the Growlanser titles is strategic RPG gameplay that's unlike anything else on the market."

People tend to look at you differently when you stuff a voodoo doll full of laxatives.

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Violence

Microsoft game studios

You and Vince, the third best voodoo doll in Madam Charmaine's shop, are charged with rescuing his maker from the evil Kosmo the Inscrutable. To get by pit frogs, imps, killadillos and more on the exotic streets of New Orleans, Vince must use his best weapon, himself. See Vince jump into a blender, stick himself with a pitchfork, step into a beartrap and over 25 ways in which Vince can hurt himself, which means he's really helping himself. So don't feel bad for Vince. It's what he does best.

Voodoo Vince

XBOX

it's good to play together

xbox.com/voodoovince

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Breakdown

Looking anything but broken so far

system: xbox
developer: namco
publisher: namco
available: march 2004

words chris hoffman

Let's face it: first-person games are a dime a dozen. Though they vary in quality and theme, most of them boil down to the same old thing. Breakdown takes that notion of a first-person game and knocks it clean on its head, creating an original title that changes our expectations and revitalizes a well-worn convention.

You don't just play Breakdown from a first-person perspective; it's more appropriate to say you live it. Instead of playing as a disembodied arm, you're actually a fully formed character, from your head down to your toes, with lifelike camera movement that results in unprecedented immersion. You can actually see your shoulders or feet as you look around, and your reflection if a mirror is nearby. While fighting, if you're hit in the gut, you'll find yourself looking down as you double over in pain; take a nasty spill and you'll be staring up at the ceiling. You can eat realistically textured food (actually taking out bites), lean on other characters and even perform what could be gaming's first-ever first-person vomit.

Defying tradition even further, shooting isn't the game's major component. Gunplay is included, but Breakdown is an action-adventure where players can beat down their opponents hand-to-hand, complete with special moves, blocking and combos. Namco is hoping to appeal to both FPS and adventure fans through the inclusion of multiple control schemes and an optional lock-on button for targeting enemies.

The one doing the targeting is Derrick Cole. The man's a mystery, even to himself. He's lost his memory, he's lost his freedom, but one thing's clear: people want him dead. Fortunately, his female comrade, Alex Hendrickson, shows up to rescue him just before an inconvenient run-in with a bullet, and a mad dash for freedom follows. Another thing quickly become clear: Cole isn't just your average guy. He's got powers pent up inside him, and he's going to use them to take out the paramilitary faction that's standing against him. Although Namco hasn't revealed too much of the story, deep-rooted conspiracies and super-soldier experimentation seem pretty likely.

The evidence so far points to Breakdown being one of the most unique first-person titles in memory. Instead of becoming just another game in a crowded genre, Breakdown appears to be creating one of its own. **play**

"You can eat realistically textured food, lean on other characters and even perform what could be gaming's first-ever first-person vomit."

Alex is the definition of "girl power." If it weren't for her skills, the adventure wouldn't last long.

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Onimusha
Blade Warriors

Swords clash, honor is threatened, blood is spilled

system: playstation 2
developer: capcom
publisher: capcom
available: february 2004

words chris hoffman

The world of Onimusha is a rich and beautiful one, where the majesty of the samurai and allure of feudal Japan meet dark fantasy and twisted history, creating incredible, action-packed adventures on the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Onimusha: Blade Warriors takes that legacy, pumps up the action, removes the exploration, and creates a unique type of action/fighting game that draws inspiration from where you might not expect.

Instead of borrowing gameplay techniques from Capcom's most famous fighting games like Street Fighter, Blade Warriors actually plays similar to Nintendo's Super Smash Brothers. Like that hit, Blade Warriors features multiple characters battling it out in an essentially 2D playfield, power-up icons that aide in the battles, simple controls and crazy four-player action. Onimusha also allows a dream match of sorts, as the character roster includes both Samanosuke from Onimusha: Warlords and Yagyu Jubei from Onimusha 2: Samurai's Destiny, as well as enemies from both games and supporting characters like Kaede and Ekei.

The main play mode in Blade Warriors is a story mode, where you fight through lovely and varied 3D environments—atop temples, on boats, in caves, along seashores, on rope bridges, amidst golden fields—slicing up waves of enemies and the occasional boss character, culminating in a battle against Nobunaga or Samanosuke and Jubei, depending on whether you're aligned with good or evil. Up to five enemies can fight you at once, primarily just lowly enemy soldiers, and though you can jump into different planes in each battlefield, the action primarily occurs two-dimensionally. As you proceed through this mode, you can suck up souls, which can then be used to level up your character, and you can also acquire new weapons.

The game's other mode is an arcade-style battle mode that feels more like a one-on-one fighter. Matches can handle from one to four players, and team play is possible. However, in our preview version, these matches were only exhibitions; there was no full arcade mode.

So far Onimusha: Blade Warriors plays good, looks good and sounds good. I admit that it wasn't quite what I was expecting from an Onimusha fighting game, but it's appearing quite worthy nonetheless. **play**

"...a unique type of action/fighting game that draws inspiration from where you might not expect."

This is the first time we've seen the Onimusha universe in full 3D...and it looks great.

(Wait 'til you see the one left in your pants.)

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TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Strong Language
Violence

XBOX

ONLY ON XBOX

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Sonic Heroes

The ultimate cure for Sonic blues

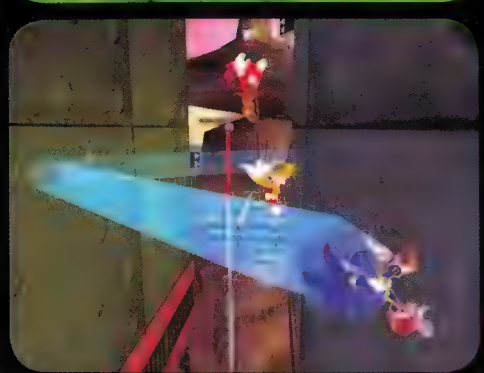
words dave halverson

Speeding into the 20th century, Sonic faces an interesting impasse, now split between two very different fanbases: those who fell in love with him during the '90s when he helped catapult Sega into the number-one spot worldwide, and the 7-&-up crowd glued to the TV every Saturday morning watching him on the Fox Block. Since his mostly outstanding run on 2D, Sonic's transition into 3D has been somewhat precarious. Sonic Adventure was certainly a breakthrough for the Dreamcast (which I still sorely miss) but it also confirmed what many die-hards feared: transitioning the magic and speed of Sonic into 3D was not going to be easy. The recently Cubed Sonic Adventure DX didn't fare nearly as well as its DC brethren, emerging in a market that since has seen a dramatic rise in the quality and integrity of 3D graphics. The messy models and wooden ancillary characters that got a pass on Dreamcast stuck out like sore thumbs on the GameCube, and the Sonic facade was suddenly starting to show some cracks.

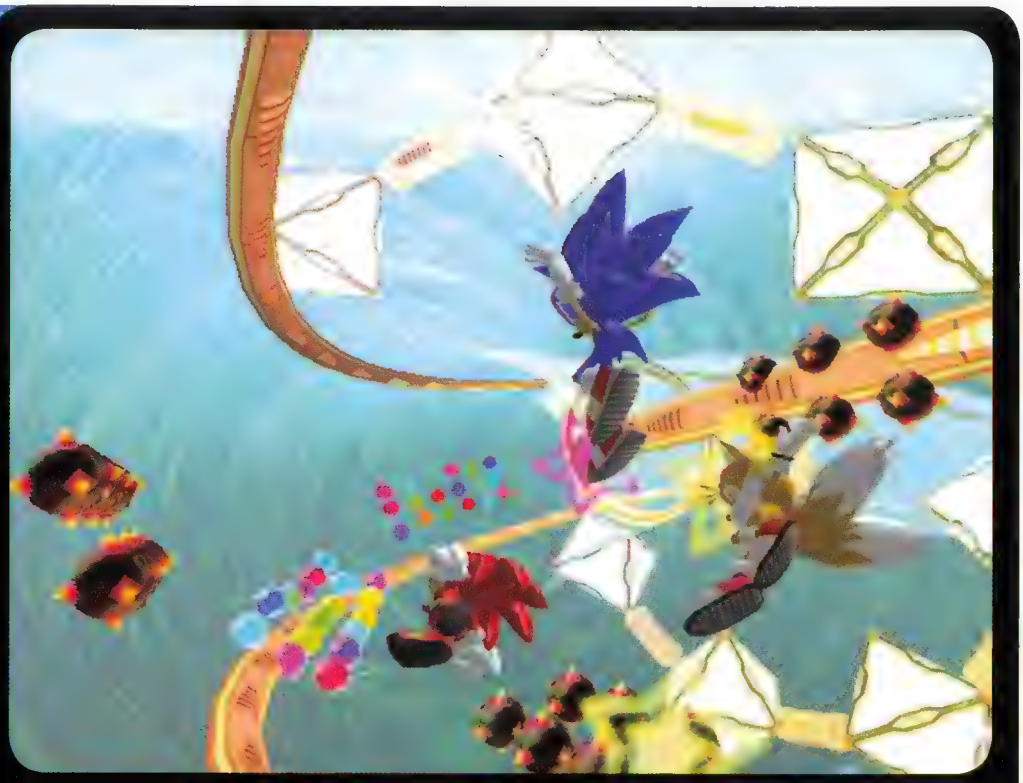
What Sonic Heroes represents is Sonic Team's latest attempt at keeping the Sonic sensation alive, capitalizing on his newfound TV cred, crossover appeal and simultaneous launch across all three consoles. In doing so, they've made like the Sega of old and pretty much reworked the entire formula, injecting old Sonic staples for die-hards (they had me at Chaotix) while feeding the franchise machine enough fodder to keep them in episodes until the Chaos come home. Speaking of Chaos, yes, they're back, and yes, I still want to beat and kick them.

The biggest addition to the Sonic mélange is the new speed/power/flying system where, in league with the ever-changing conditions on the surface, you must switch to the appropriate character for given situations: power to knock out a much tougher Robotnik army, flight for reaching airborne booster rings and higher ground, and speed to negotiate the latest network of loops, twists, rails and poles, a collection of which makes Heroes by far the most manic Sonic game ever. Casino Park and Rail Canyon alone are enough to send the family pet to the ER. The teams also scramble for attacks, flying formations and Team Blast—special moves that trigger signature cutscenes, wiping out everything in the vicinity. Sonic Boom!!

Initially, the system seems a bit contrived, as you're prodded two-fold by signs and the same horrible American voice-over from SA at what to do: "Can you break this rock, Knuckles?" quips the lobotomized 1st grader voice of Tails. But as the game progresses, so does the rhythm the system is meant to instill, which by mid-game becomes second nature. As for the voice, with any luck,



system ps2, gc, xbox
developer sonic team
publisher sega
available january 2004



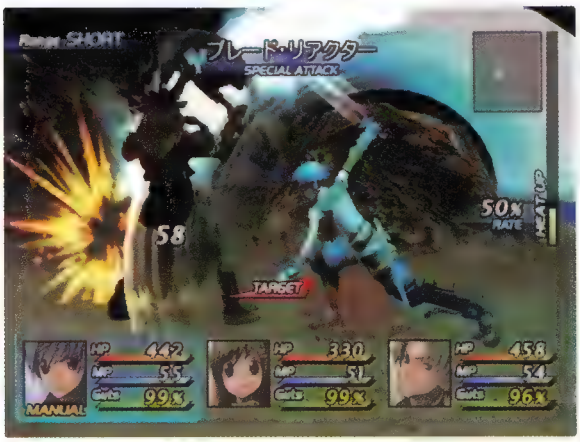
Above: Team Dark in flying formation. Man, is E-102 big!

"Not only will you want to return with each team to experience the variable difficulty, but also to soak in the splendor of this all-new engine..."

Mobile Suit Gundam Encounter in Space

system: playstation 2 / **developer:** banpresto / **publisher:** bandai / **available:** december

I think I may have used these exact words long ago, but they'll do just fine again: Gundam fans rejoice. Yes, another attempt at gaming decency is being proffered with this latest Gundam effort, but this one actually shows some promise. Featuring over 70 mechs culled from various anime series throughout the years, the game also boasts over 80 minutes of full quality FMV intercut with the action. Though it's a far cry from the sexiness of Zone of the Enders, the gameplay offers an interesting style of deep space shooting and slashing combat. Keep your fingers crossed. *-MH*



Star Ocean: Till The End of Time

system: ps2 / **developer:** tri-ace / **publisher:** square enix / **available:** spring 2004

Star Ocean: Till the End of Time was originally scheduled to have been released by now, but we can't really be too upset since the game, now headed stateside this spring, still looks so impressive. As fans of the previous installments of Star Ocean (only one of which made it to the U.S.) know, the series is epic science-fiction role-playing that takes the wonderment of outer space and augments it with stunning visuals and an action-heavy real-time battle system. A story of exploration, love, mystery and discovery awaits in this grandiose, futuristic world. *-CH*

Drakengard

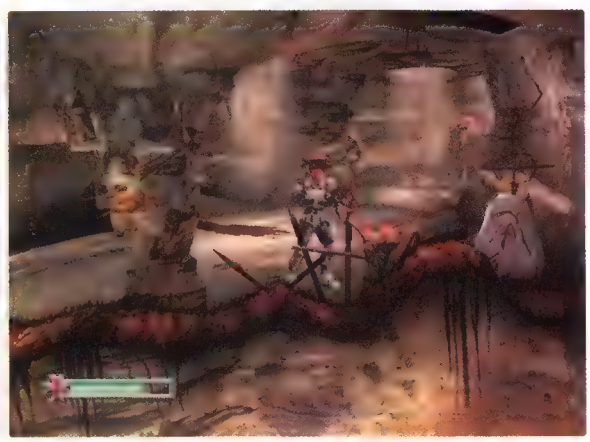
system: ps2 / **developer:** cavia inc. / **publisher:** square enix / **available:** spring 2004

To recap, here's what we know about Drakengard so far. Critically wounded and on the brink of death, a human, named Caim, and a red dragon form an unbreakable bond as a means of survival and revenge, their lives and destinies forever intertwined. The tale promises to be dark, tragic and filled with self-sacrifice, while the gameplay of this action-RPG combines Panzer Dragoon-style aerial action, complete with multi-enemy lock-on, with ground-based melee combat. We also know that these new screens make us want to play a finished version more than ever. *-CH*

Plague of Darkness

system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** widescreen games / **publisher:** namco / **available:** june 2004

What if the Bubonic Plague that ravaged Europe in 14th century wasn't just a deadly disease? What if it was actually caused by a zombie-raising demon of the most evil kind? That's the premise of Plague of Darkness, a medieval hack 'n' slash action game where the blood and body parts fly freely. As the knight Duran, you'll have access to varied weapons, such as swords, crossbows and daggers, and you'll be able to augment your abilities with magical tarot cards as you attempt to free Europe from its nightmare. *-CH*



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FirstStrike: Grant City Anti-Crime

system: ps2, xbox, gc / **developer:** namco / **publisher:** namco / **available:** q1 2004

Grounded in the Dead to Rights universe, FirstStrike is a third-person tactical action title that lets you witness the Grant City Anti-Crime unit's fall from grace. As far as gameplay goes, you can go in weapons blazing, taking out enemies with an assortment of guns, rifles, grenades and more, even calling in snipers for support, or you can opt for stealth, using gadgets and arresting the bad guys instead of filling them full of lead. As part of a three-man unit, you'll have to watch your partners' backs…but they might be stabbing yours by the time all's said and done. *-CH*

Wrath Unleashed

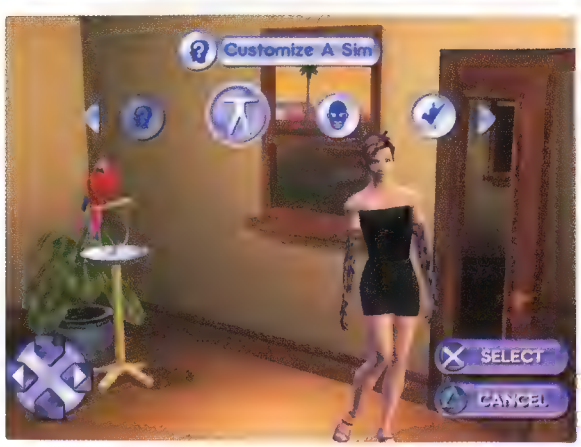
system: xbox / **developer:** the collective / **publisher:** lucasarts / **available:** december

File the hexagonal fighting strategy of Wrath Unleashed under "esoteric." On a giant 3D map, monsters take turn battling it out to capture scattered temples. You've got four players dueling on the board, representing the elements of fire, earth, water and wind. The key is to place a character on an appropriate spot, which may improve attributes or lend special skills for an attack depending on the match. The makeup of terrain also plays in on the effectiveness of a move. Unlike most games designed with Wrath's general gameplay focus, the fighting is set up in real time, with simple close and long-range attacks comprising your arsenal. *-BF*

Maximum Chase

system: xbox / **developer:** genki / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** january

Because you've always dreamed of recklessly driving such classics as the Pontiac Firebird and Chevrolet Camaro pretty much anywhere you'd like through downtown city traffic, Microsoft brings you Maximum Chase—a racing game of the…unusual kind. In addition to driving away from equally fast cars that want to viciously turn your ride into scrap, you'll be discharging weapons to keep the carnage level pumping. That's pretty much the extent of the gameplay, which is being intertwined with dialogue and filmed cutscenes. Yes, dear reader, in the spirit of Sewer Shark...live-action FMV. *-BF*

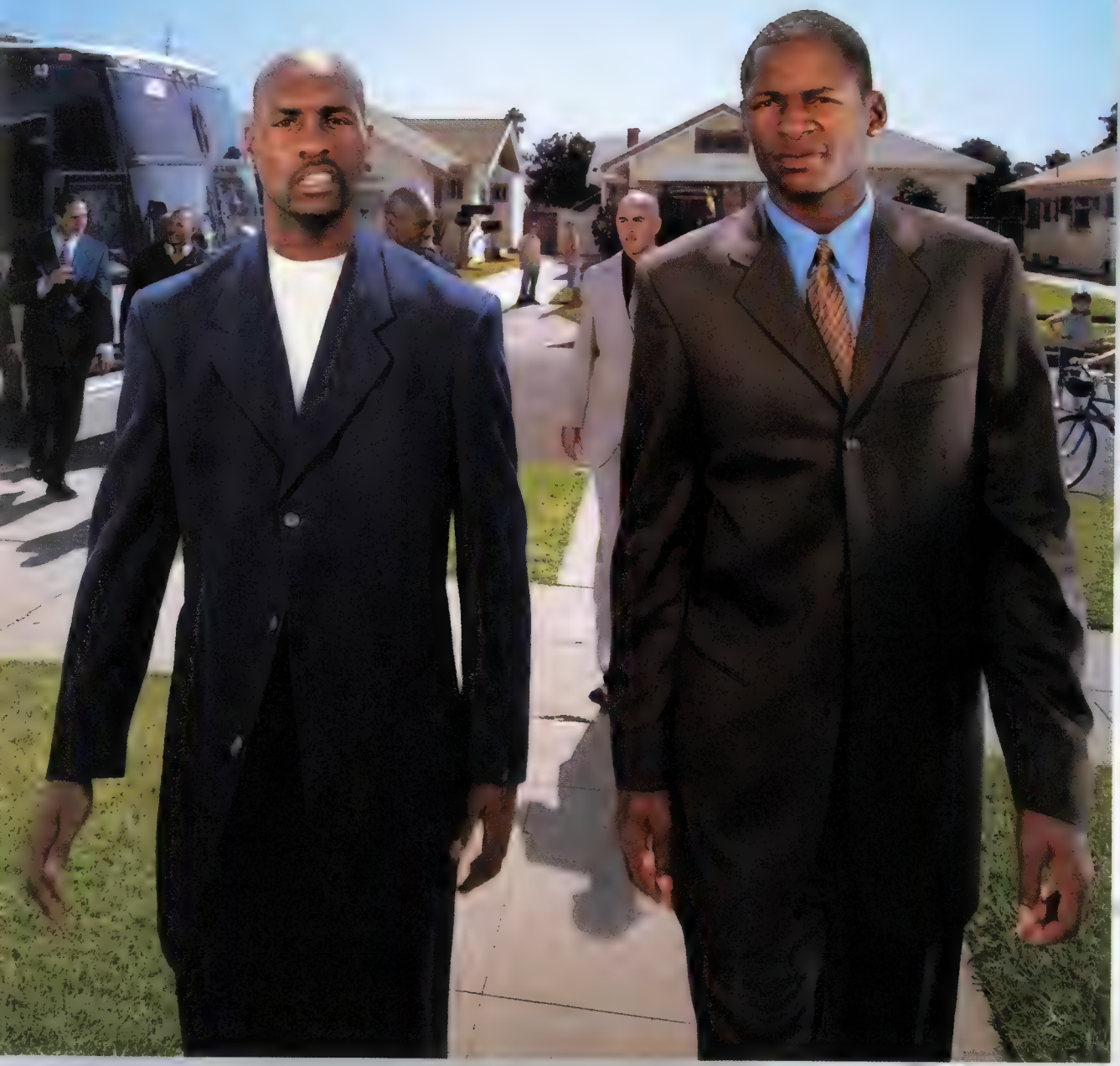


The Sims Bustin' Out

system: ps2, xbox, gc, gba / **developer:** maxis / **publisher:** electronic arts / **available:** december

It was only a matter of time before the Sims were going to get sick of being cooped up in their virtual houses and want to venture out into the "real world." In The Sims Bustin' Out, players can choose from a variety of hilarious career paths. New jobs include a Gangster, Fashion Victim, Mad Scientist and Athlete. What makes Bustin' Out fun is to see how your Sims interact in new and different locations. Places like the Love Shack and Club Bubb offer some interesting scenarios that will definitely make you laugh. In addition to new careers and locations, players can unlock over 100 new objects and special moves such as laser light shows, clothes and jewelry. *-TH*

Bring home the NBA.



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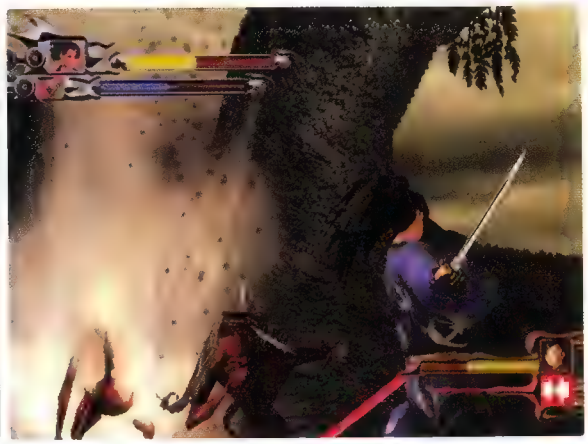
Carmen Sandiego
The Secret of the Stolen Drums

system: ps2 / **developer:** artificial mind & movement
publisher: ea/ / **available:** november

Blood Will Tell

system: ps2 / **developer:** wow /
publisher: sega / **available:** q1 2004

Originally titled "Dororo," Blood Will Tell is a modern-day action epic adapted from the classic manga by Osamu Tezuka (Astro Boy) that follows the adventures of Hyakkimaru, a samurai haunted by a shocking secret, who is on a quest to uncover his past and regain his humanity, having been robbed of every limb, organ and even his flesh as a baby. Choose to battle with various weapons such as blades embedded inside Hyakkimaru's arms, a bazooka hidden inside his leg, or weapons that are found during the course of the adventure, and send over 100 demons back to hell. *-DH*



MX Unleashed

system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** rainbow studios /
publisher: thq / **available:** january

Max Payne 2
The Fall of Max Payne

system: xbox / **developer:** remedy /
publisher: rockstar / **available:** december

Touted as "A Film Noir Love Story," if you love guns and violence, nothing could be truer…or as dripping with noir style. When Max, back on the NYPD, runs into a ghost from his past, one Mona Sax (okay, no hidden meaning there), sparks (and plenty of bullets) fly. This year's Payne boasts better visuals all around, Shootdodging™, "Cinematic shots" (adding to the already dramatic flare) and more underworld goons than you can shake a sawed-off at. Join Max this December for more quality bullet time and dirty deeds in the name of liberty and justice for all. *-DH*

I'm not a diva, but I play one on TV.

The Lord of the Rings
The Return of the King
The king of movie action games

words brady fiechter

Few games have the fortune of drawing from a wellspring of richness like the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Few games extend their literary or film roots into the interactive setting with such a mastery of what made their source sing. Few games are as excitingly presented, as gorgeously constructed, as intensely visceral as the extraordinary The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King.

Every single aspect of The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers has been made bigger, louder and better for this ambitious sequel. The basic gameplay has been retained: hack, slash, stab, slaughter, shoot and fire your way through settings lifted directly from the set pieces of the film. But where The Return of the King extends far beyond its predecessor is in the hugely enhanced spirit of adventure and far more elaborate gameplay path. This is a raw action title, with an overwhelming number of fiends onscreen at once to thwart your progress, but the spectacular structure, pacing and inventive inclusion of cinematic components elevate the game far beyond its foundation of typical combat mechanics.

Mention must be made of the skill in which the action is staged. There is always the threat in this type of game for the endless repetition of combat to quickly grow old, but the flow and feel of every swing of the blade, the parry system and added element of background interference, are a source of constant, heart-pounding engagement. Return of the King is just so incredibly exciting every step of the way.

The power of Return of the King's visuals is oftentimes disarming. Admittedly, if the game didn't play half as well—if it were as limited as the original—there would still be an immense appeal by spirit and artistry alone. Areas like the graves and outer wall are visual wonders, and the kinetic placement of all the activity adds the extra charge to ignite your senses. Anyone in love with art can watch this all unfold with wide eyes.

As you delight in the film footage transitioning the levels with dissolves that end in the real-time—every movie-licensed game should borrow from this approach—your excitement for the game's world is already on high. The game tells a story and paints its mood with visual spectacle, but the way the action unfolds, the soaring musical score and the invaluable touches like character chatter simply take it all into a realm we don't experience often with gamemaking. The levels are successfully designed to be alive all around you; subtle moments like descending a long ladder, going past a dilapidated room where a battle is unfolding without your intervention and into the next room below, create the illusion that the war is happening organically and independently; you're not the typically omnipotent warrior impacting every point of conflict around you. You're in the middle of it all, with death and destruction mounting around every corner, where every step is a perilous effort steeped in spectacle and chaos.

Few games possess such amazement of presentation, but the traditional gameplay touches contained within are strong and many. Combo meters and experience ratings between levels feed the durable sensation of accomplishment and growth, and they're simple enough to not distract from the essential mode of play. That all this can be joined by a friend in co-op play makes The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King sensational entertainment. **A-**

"Few games are as excitingly presented, as gorgeously constructed, as intensely visceral as the extraordinary The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King."

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Medal of Honor Rising Sun

The accomplished series continues its intense depiction of the horrors of war

words

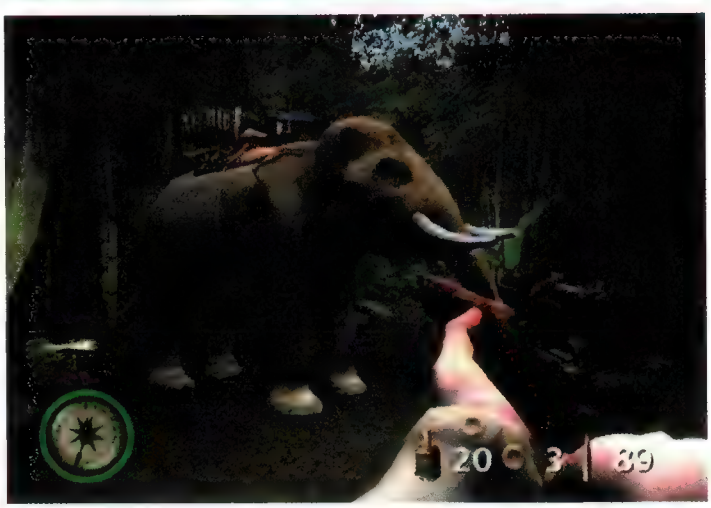
A giant explosion awakens you in the bowels of the USS California, prompting you to make your way topside. Injured bodies lie on the floor, pinned under rubble. Fires rage all around. On the deck of the crumbling ship, you man a turret, desperately trying to detonate approaching waves of torpedoes while spraying the sky with machine gun fire; down go ten Japanese fighter planes while hundreds more lay waste to the surroundings, filling the air with an ominous glow of smoke and fire. The riveting scene continues as you jump aboard a small boat, manning another gun to aid in the escort of the USS Nevada through the blinding chaos of battleship row, coming to a rest in a sea of floating corpses.

And so begins the death-leaden campaign of Medal of Honor: Rising Sun, the fierce first-person shooter that once again straps you into the tragic intensity of World War II. Whether storming the thick brush of the Philippines or darting in and out of dilapidated buildings and cleaning out the enemy-infested streets of Singapore, your mission is the same: pick off armies of enemy soldiers with hugely appealing vintage weapons, slowly breaking through the engaging resistance one calculated step at a time. The action is staged brilliantly at times, especially in the earlier parts of the game, relying on skilled soldier placement, heart-pounding scripted scenarios and a good amount of intelligent oppositional force. There are moments of true inspiration in Rising Sun, helping us disregard the occasional stretches when the game misses the ambitious mark.

The orchestrated score, feeding the mood and tension of the moment, is joined by incredible use of sound, phenomenally aiding the visual and mechanical strengths of the game with invaluable power. This is a tightly wound action game that speaks with both emotion and visceral crackle; the entire package, bound with technical and creative force on all fronts, is simply superb gamemaking.

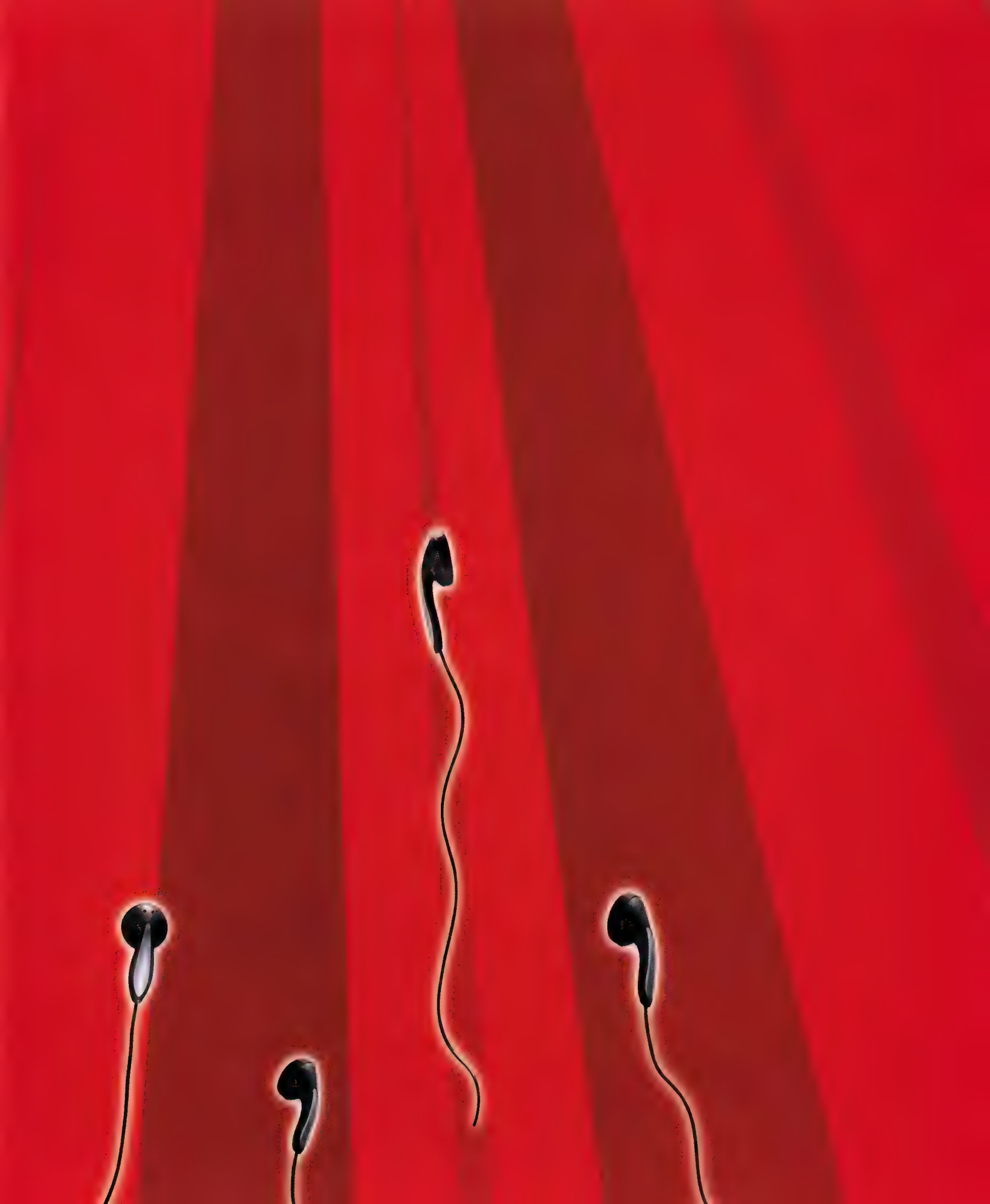
One area where the game stumbles a bit is in its inconsistency. There are moments of greatness, moments of awesome intensity, while other times the game is just really good—a skillful first-person shooter enhanced by its setting but typical in its approach. Rising Sun also wants to tell a strong story, but it forces its drama with misguided dialogue and a failed attempt to bring some empathy to the serious nature of the game. The storytelling is inevitably off-putting and distracting; I miss the sparing, supernatural intrigue that drove the series early on.

I love the craft behind Medal of Honor: Rising Sun, but there are parts of the game that do raise questions about the necessary value of the sensitive world we are interacting in. A friend commented as she watched me play: how would someone who fought in this horrible conflict receive their tragedy being turned into entertainment without any implications other than to entertain? I don't have a final answer for that, but I do know that Medal of Honor: Rising sun engaged me more heavily than any FPS I've played this year. **B+**



The game presents a nice mix of outdoor and indoor environments.

"The action is staged brilliantly at times, especially in the earlier parts of the game..."

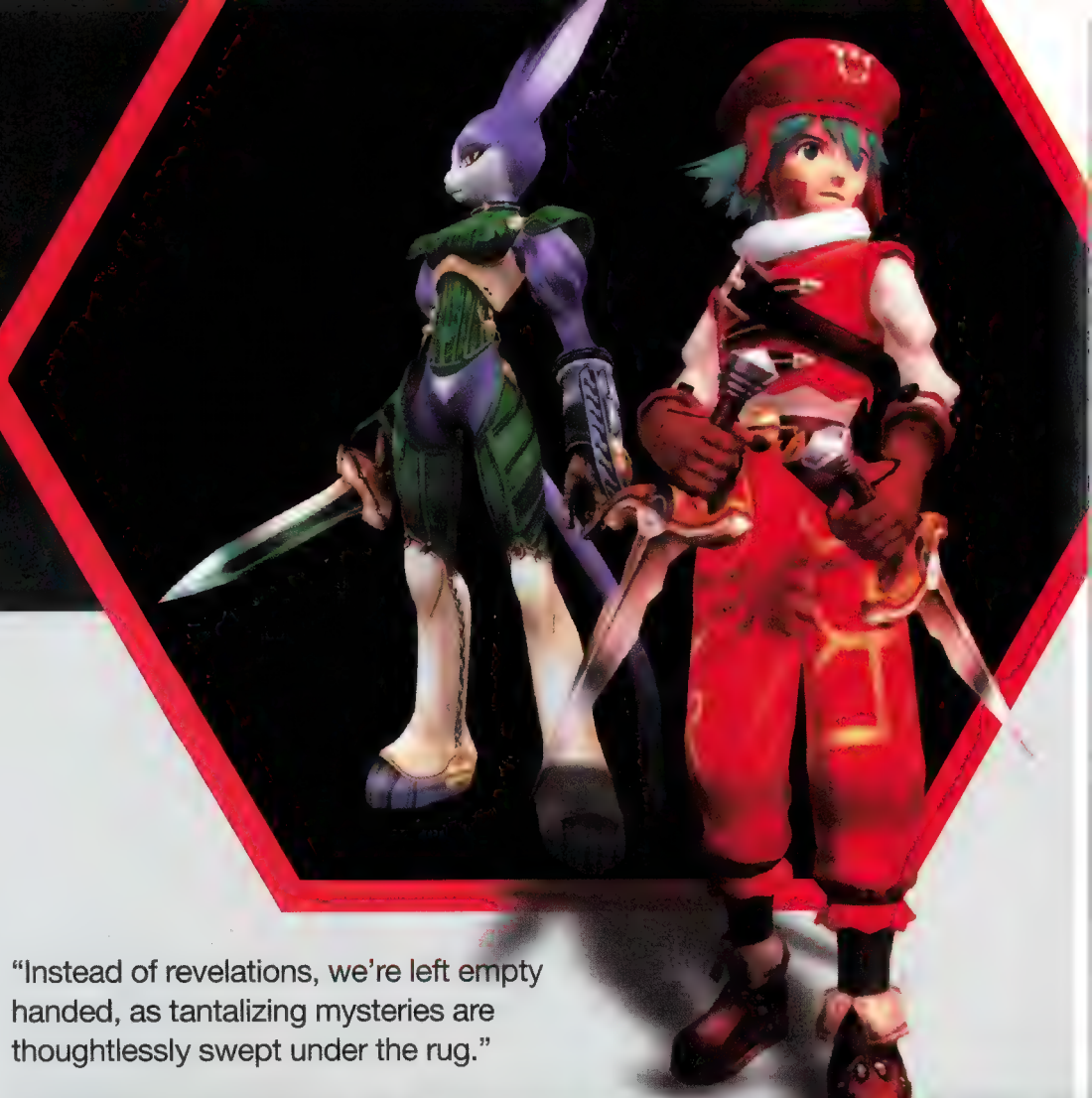


.hack Part 4 Quarantine

The end of The World as we know it

words chris hoffman

system: playstation 2
developer: cyber connect 2
publisher: bandai
available: february 2004



The latest and last installment of .hack is déjà vu all over again. As the climactic chapter in Bandai's episodic, multi-media-spanning series, .hack part 4: Quarantine exhibits virtually all the same traits as its predecessors: recurring flaws like uninspired dungeons, dull combat, unsightly draw-in and cumbersome menus are fully expected. The same can also be said of the game's pluses—those being unique false-MMORPG gameplay, fantastic character designs and a story that continues to engage, if not satisfy,

In general, Quarantine brings players back to a very familiar place, featuring the same visuals, the same music, the same cast of characters, the same settings. The difference this time around, however, is that the tedious dungeons are longer, the enemies tougher, and the AI of your allies that much more inadequate. Equipping and commanding AI characters was clunky before (why can't they use items on command?), but it's accentuated by enemy monsters that can kill you in seconds flat—even when your level is nearly maxed out—if you aren't constantly supervising your mentally challenged friends. And if you try playing Quarantine as a new game without uploading your weapons and stats from Outbreak, your punishment will likely be swift and painful.

More importantly, Quarantine is the ultimate culmination of the three previous games' intrigue and action, the make-or-break point that reveals all of the time spent as a worthwhile experience or so much wasted effort. In this regard, Quarantine hit me as a major letdown. Despite excellent presentation and an edge-of-your-seat twist in the middle of the game, the story is rather lacking compared to the vast promise that it holds. The game nicely wraps up the plot at hand, but the surface of The World's cryptic backstory is barely scratched. Instead of revelations, we're left empty handed, as tantalizing mysteries are thoughtlessly swept under the rug.

After having spent more than 100 hours with the .hack games, I couldn't help but feel that the payoff wasn't worth the effort. Huge fans of the .hack universe might be satisfied through secret characters, but considering the massive investment it takes to get them, I was expecting a lot more. Although I do enjoy the .hack world, I'd recommend watching the .hack//SIGN anime series over playing this game. **C+**

"Instead of revelations, we're left empty handed, as tantalizing mysteries are thoughtlessly swept under the rug."

When you engage tough new enemies like the Pumpkin Head, get ready to swear at your inept teammates.

Project Gotham Racing 2

More quality from Bizarre Creations

system: xbox
developer: bizarre creations
publisher: microsoft
available: december

words michael hobbs

Great models, great environments, great control. I guess that makes it great.

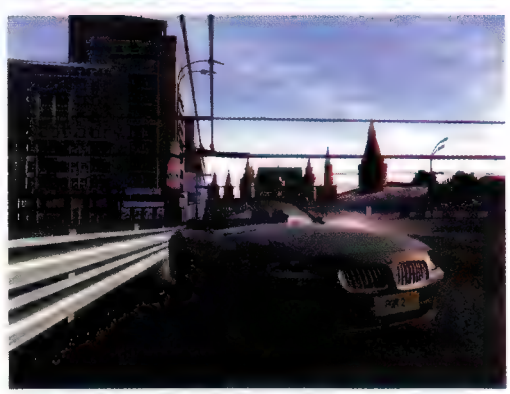
Project Gotham gets a little better with each installment. Originally debuting on the Sega Dreamcast as Metropolis Street Racer, we've seen in each subsequent Xbox sequel a steady progression and refinement of the basic play principles laid down in that first game. Things don't change much in other words, but that's fine, because what made the original great still works.

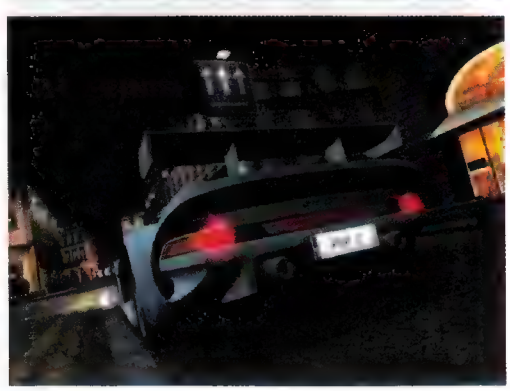
Unlike most other racing games where you race for position to either earn money or progress through some sort of story or ranking system, Project Gotham encourages that you drive well. Of course, winning is a big part of the game, but it's almost equally important that you do it with some style. Taking a good line through a corner, overtaking, holding a beautiful opposite lock drift and things of this sort will earn you so-called Kudos points, which accrue and can then be exchanged for new cars, courses, challenges, etc. It's a fairly simple idea, but it brings a good deal of excitement and satisfaction to the basic racing and driving action, which, thanks to its solid control, is very good in and of itself. New to Project Gotham 2 is the ability to use drafting to earn points, and continuing the trend started by the last game, it is much easier to hold on to your Kudos during the racing action. In the original game, the slightest tap would sap your points, but by now you can engage in almost Touring Car levels of contact. Purists may scoff, but it does make the game more enjoyable overall.

The biggest change to Project Gotham is the inclusion of Live online capabilities. Though we didn't get to participate in any online racing as of this writing, we were able to enjoy the instant ranking and ghost features. If you are connected to Xbox Live, you can view your rank immediately upon completing each of the single-player challenges. This adds great incentive to better your time, trying again and again to get yourself above SexyMan287 or whoever is better than you. You can even download ghosts of top drivers and compete virtually in that fashion.

Whatever your pleasure, there is no question that Project Gotham 2 looks great. The car models are top notch, as are the backgrounds, which are full of detail and neat touches like reflective glass on the buildings big and small. Especially well done also are the drivers inside the cars, which lean and react with the "g-forces" in a very realistic way. Another nice touch is the show room, where you can walk around a virtual car museum and take each car out for a test drive.

I guess the biggest problem facing Project Gotham 2 is that two giants of the genre are on the way. Both R: Racing Evolution for all platforms and Gran Turismo 4 for PlayStation 2 will probably be better games, even if that seems unnecessarily harsh to what is by all normal frames of reference a great and well designed racing title. But as much as I like Project Gotham as a series, my heart belongs to Ridge Racer and Gran Turismo. **B+**





"Whatever your pleasure, there is no question that Project Gotham 2 looks great."

from conception to reality

"We're confident in saying it will be the hit of the holiday season..." *forbes.com*

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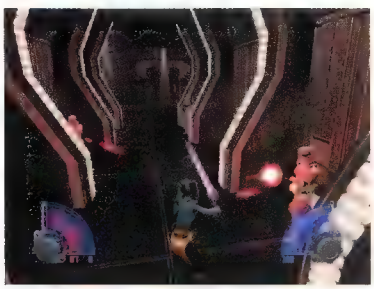
system: xbox
developer: raven soft/vicarious visions
publisher: lucasarts
available: november

Star Wars Jedi Knight

Jedi Academy

Needs more Force

words dave halverson



For those who merely like the films, Star Wars action games remain somewhat paradoxical, shrouded in a veil of denial, save for the SNES' Super Star Wars and anything Factor 5. Good or bad—and let's face it, most of them are the latter—if it can be said "Star Wars fans will love it," even the most blatant violations seem to get a pass. I say make a good game first and a Star Wars game second...but they never listen. Why dress your Mona Lisa in Old Navy when you can afford Versace? Lord Vader only knows. Imagine if Treasure or Smilebit made a Star Wars action game. Would there be dancing in the streets? But I digress; let us speak of the albatross at hand.

Playing the first few levels of Jedi, wooden characters and all (Luke looks like a trout with bad hair, and don't get me started on these cutscenes...okay, do: the acting is sub-par and the characters look like they're carved out of soap), for a moment, I thought I'd stumbled across a formidable Star Wars actioner outside of the Nintendo galaxy. Granted, I was platforming with characters that weren't meant to on surfaces not made for it, but that's par for the Force. Otherwise it was all systems go, or so it seemed.

Leaving the Academy for some Jedi-style on-the-job training (the underlying plot runs deep—stolen Force power, cults running amok, dogs and cats living together...), the initial labyrinths and first outdoor mission were by Star Wars standards surprisingly good, aside from the usual series pitfalls like limited animation schemes (falling off a ledge, you get walking animation in the air) and sticky collision where an inch-high rise in the terrain requires a jump to navigate.

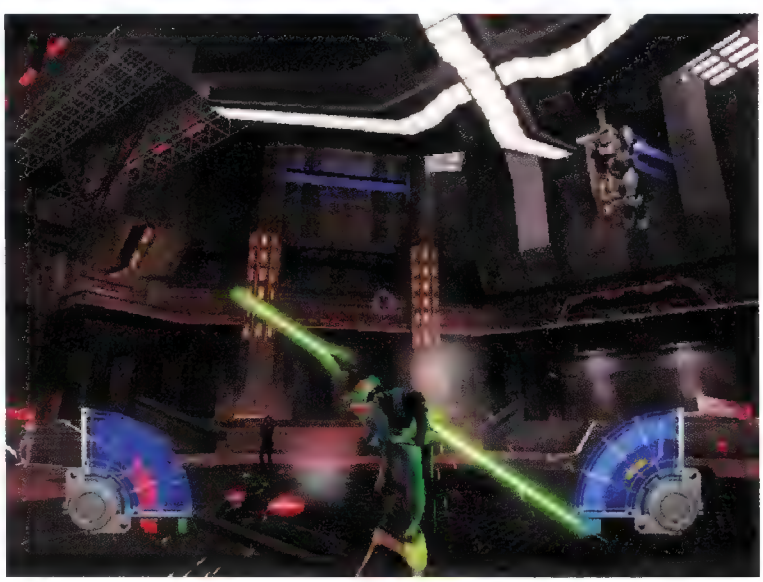
The interiors are steely and clean, and the action fast and furious, filled with the vibrating hum of flying lightsabers and whimpers of crumpling Empire scum.

Wielding the lightsaber in Jedi Academy is pure guilty pleasure. You can wing it with your left hand for crippling strikes or brandish it using one of three possible techniques, while simultaneously (depending on your character class) wielding Force powers at will, tossing crates and choking prey with the power of your keen Jedi mind—seriously neat-o stuff, especially if you're card-carrying. Go for a gun and things quickly switch into a speedier FPS mode, and all is well in the galaxy. John Williams's soaring orchestral bliss fills the air, and cool platforming puzzles abound. You get to fight side-by-side with Chewy, beat down Rancors, dodge sandworms on Blejeel and even converse with '70s Luke; it's enough to make fans want to get in line for *Episode 3*. And then reality sets in as you arrive on Hoth.

The cool thing about Hoth is that you get to ride a Tauntaun; the bad thing about Hoth is that they look like polygonal origami—you've just had your first Star Wars wake-up call. For an Xbox game, the state of these models is nothing short of baffling, and the adjacent icy caves are of mid-range N64 quality, and that's being generous. And if the wheels start to come off on Hoth, they actually dislodge and vaporize in the atmosphere the second you mount a speeder. I can stomach chunky models and less than stellar frame rates in a game that should run at 80 fps given its complexity, but I draw the line at 16-bit 3D on my Xbox. The state of the speeder level left me speechless. I have no words to describe how bad it actually is, I can only send my condolences to anyone forced to live through it. If you must, like eating a cow eye on Fear Factor, just get through it and move on. Things do get better. This game experiences such highs and lows, it's as if three separate teams worked on it, two of which were working for college credit. I've never seen a game degrade and then spring back to life in such a manner or with such abandon. One minute you're looking up at a beautiful celestial sky and the next at a bowl-shaped, fixed, low-res bitmap sky that makes the galaxy look like a bedroom ceiling. A shame given how great parts of it are.

> "This game experiences such highs and lows, it's as if three separate teams worked on it..."

Whatever happened—and we'll probably never know—I can't say Star Wars fans will love it this time out. I think they'll really like parts of it and loathe others, but one thing is for sure: this legendary franchise deserves much better. Lucas needs to take a look at the integrity of, say, a Metal Gear or Splinter Cell and think about applying that level of polish to their Star Wars action brand. Don't do it for me (*The Matrix* is my sci-fi of choice); do it for all those people who not only know what a Tauntaun is, but actually care. **C+**



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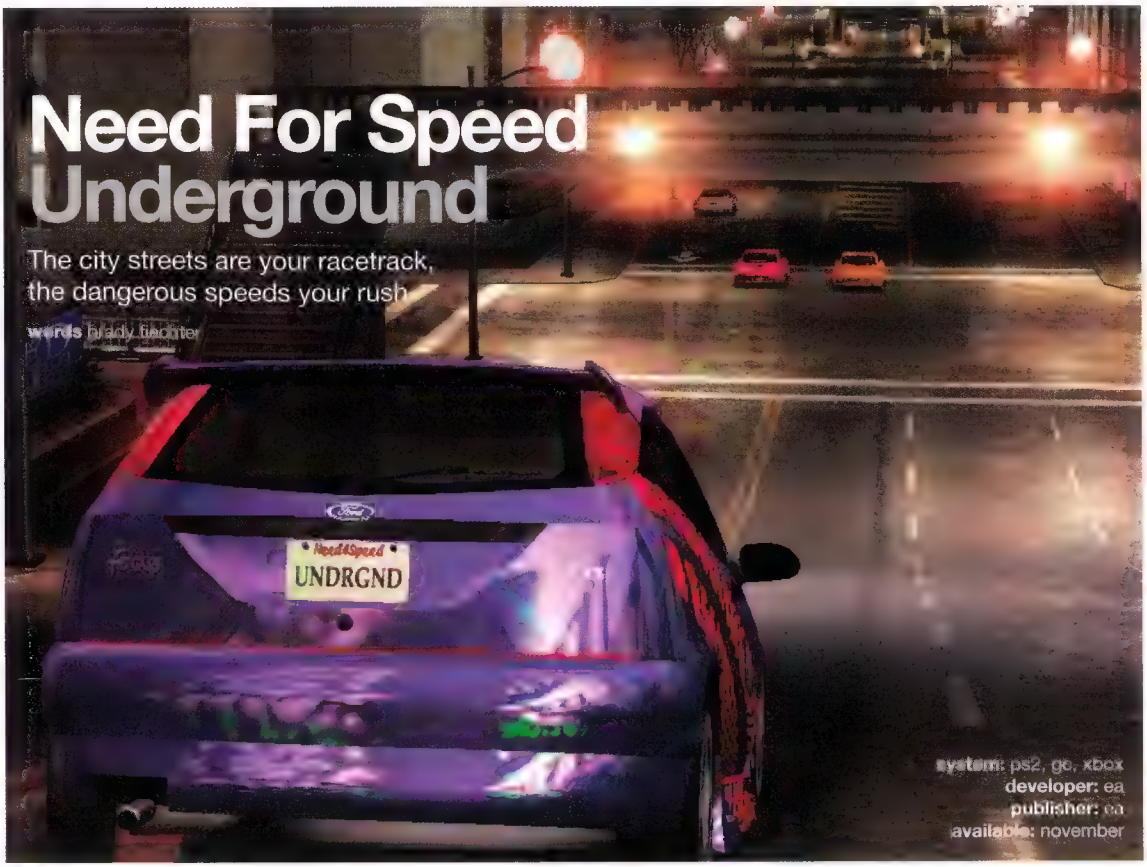
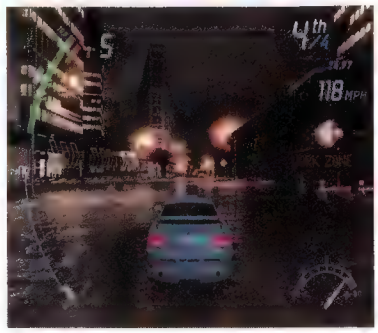
Need For Speed Underground

The city streets are your racetrack, the dangerous speeds your rush

words brady fiechter



system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: ea
publisher: ea
available: november



Your car starts bear-bones; part of the fun is building it into a parish

Trading in the exotic machines of before for more modest import tuner cars is Need for Speed Underground, the latest and most accomplished entry in EA's consistently improving racing series. The setting is the slick neon-soaked urban streets cloaked in the darkness of the early morning hours, when the underground racing scene heats up for spontaneous competition of the most dangerous order. Traffic doesn't stop. Streets aren't conveniently laid down for sanctioned racing. A boost of nitro isn't out of the question. A risky shortcut can mean the difference between a big payoff and the trash talk that comes from last place.

The competition is fast and skilled, continually challenging your newly outfitted car to undergo the necessary upgrades to keep up with the increasing demands of the many different course layouts and driver levels. Just because you may pick a Volkswagen AG to start out with—work hard enough and the S2000 beast is yours—doesn't mean you're clunking along as a limp speedster wannabe. The game is staged so well that every race is exciting in its own right, gradually building the intensity as you allocate your winnings to all sorts of upgrades, visually and mechanically. The satisfaction of building out your basic ride into a formidable racer, watching your machine climb the ranks and make magazine covers, growing a reputation that precedes you, is all part of Need for Speed Underground's high-energy draw. Pulling it all together is razor-sharp presentation, incredible city construction and track design, and a use of sound and mixed tunes that is unrivaled in the genre; praise to EA for bypassing the numbing of ill-placed techno.

Most gamers who play Need for Speed Underground will probably have little to no knowledge of the street-racing scene, yet the game enticingly offers so much licensed and authentic product within its framework that you can't help but enjoy fastidiously tinkering with all that's here. Improving your basic racing skills is one thing; adding to the visual and mechanical power of the car makes it all that much more fun. There's also a superb attention to the car's physics, which are balanced keenly between real-world and game-world design. Whether drag-racing on a straight line through traffic or sprinting through the endlessly winding city expanse, Need for Speed Underground straps you in for a ride no other racing game offers. **A-**

"...Need for Speed Underground straps you in for a ride no other racing game offers."

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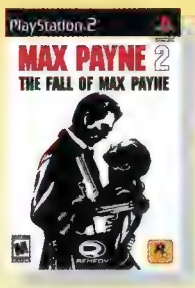
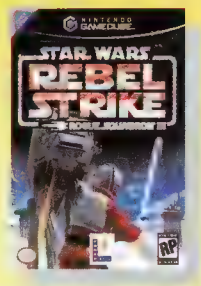
Manhunt
PS2



Max Payne 2: The Fall Of Max Payne
PS2, XBOX, PC
PC Available 10/14
PS2 and XBOX Available 12/2

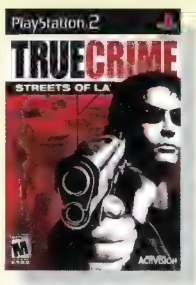
SSX3
PS2, XBOX, NGC

Need For Speed Underground
PS2, XBOX, NGC



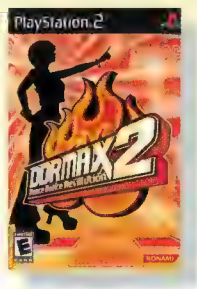
Star Wars Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike
NGC

Atari 10 In 1 Game Controller



True Crime: Streets Of LA
PS2, XBOX, NGC

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3
XBOX



Dance Dance Revolution Max 2
PS2

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Dinosaur Hunting

Welcome to the jungle

words dave halverson

system: xbox
developer: microsoft game studios
publisher: metro 3D
available: february 2004

Up to this point, if you wanted to bring down a dinosaur, you had two choices: the poopy Jurassic Park games or Dino Crisis, which, let's face it, was awesome. Metro 3D's Dinosaur Hunter is similar in that it brings the prehistoric people eaters into the 20th century, but otherwise unique in its faithful representation of what it might be like to actually bring down one of Earth's first tenants. The animals' mannerisms, the terrain, and your current state of readiness all play greatly into the mix, provided you reach your mission objective, a path that itself is lined with peril as well as a keen sense of adventure and wonder. This is no straightforward lock-and-load shooter, nor is it a dry simulation. Dinosaur Hunter is a full-blown action-adventure that pits you against the very real pitfalls of a prehistoric landscape. They spared no expense.

The game takes place in 1910, when British geologist Norton Klast discovers dinosaurs living on the highlands of Guiana in the Amazon interior where they've existed for thousands of years, hidden due to a tectonic shift that closed them off from the rest of the world. Now facing extinction for various reasons, international teams of hunters are called in to take down and transport them to a more fitting habitat before they become so much transmission fluid.

Think Jurassic Park without the rides or electric fences and you're pretty much there.

The individual hunts—which have you tracking and bringing down species, collecting DNA samples to mix ingredients for stun shells—offer a real sense of these amazing beasts' weight and immensity, as well as how they may have actually reacted to human beings and our boomsticks; sometimes it's magnificent and sometimes damn scary. Raptors are especially nasty. If you've ever wondered what it might be like to be surrounded by a pack of them...inquire within and you'll get a taste. Well, either you or them. There's nothing arcadey or shoot 'em up about it: Dinosaur Hunting is a serious (and seriously beautiful) thinking man's action game. Even the soundtrack is elegant, like something out of PSO—really wonderful stuff.

An Xbox exclusive, DH's jungles, plateaus and plains are painstakingly detailed down to the last leaf. Stockpiles are realistic too: weapons and ammo can only be restocked by purchasing them at base camp, using money earned for each captured beast. I suppose the game had to have some type of ammunition limiter/commerce, so this seems as good as any, even though it makes no sense in the context of the story. Who sends out the world's best hunters on the excursion of a lifetime and then charges them for rifle shells? This also makes the game very tactical, which, if this is your thing, you're probably obliged to. **B**

The world's largest vegetarian thinks twice about today's menu.

"There's nothing arcadey or shoot 'em up about it: Dinosaur Hunting is a serious (and seriously beautiful) thinking man's action game."

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Final Fantasy X-2

Not your typical Fantasy

words brady fiechter

system playstation 2
developer square
publisher square enix
available november

There's never been a game quite like Final Fantasy X-2, and there will probably never be another. Anyone new to video games would be lost to its appeal. The Final Fantasy faithful might receive it as an insult to their pure fantasy-driven RPG series. If you can surrender to its extreme, sometimes obnoxious eccentricities, ignore the blunders and admire the passionate ambition, seeing the beauty swirling around it all, then you are in for a wild, gripping, quirky, sometimes tremendously emotional ride. Final Fantasy X-2 is gamemaking on the edge.

Let's dispense with a few of the nags: characters stiffly emote, voice acting is limp, the story takes a long time to pick up steam, heavy shifts in stylistic tone go unchecked, silly quips from your party punctuate the more awkward missteps the game takes with its playful trappings. Had these issues been redirected, the game would be just that much more commanding, yet as it exists in all its unrivaled enormity, Final Fantasy X-2 is a phenomenal adventure.

Everything you've come to expect from the accomplished series is alive and very well, only taken to a place you inevitably wouldn't expect. All this delirious imagination may be perceived as self-indulgent and unrestrained, but how can you deny the power of the unique artistry, the fascination of a cultural aesthetic bursting forth in every frame?

While Final Fantasy X-2 starts playful and innocent, the

veil of darkness begins to fall soon enough, sprouting the kind of conflict any good RPG must contain. Returning from her summoning days in Final Fantasy X as the new central figure, Yuna is a wonderful presence, written with a subtle depth that comes out the further she and her team of sphere hunters uncover the continuing mysteries of Spira. There have been more serious Final Fantasy games with more resounding implications, but this new approach to building a universe full of complexities and causes and effects is no less entertaining.

The game is never less than interesting to look at. At its most visually striking, it shows us sights we've never seen before, pulling from no one source of inspiration for its designs. Nothing really looks practical or functional, only cool and stylized for dazzle. For such a huge game, the variety is impressive, properly linked together for that important sense of belonging to a cohesive, enormous world. Despite being more of a hub-based adventure, with scattered mission quests taking over the tedious travel that we're used to in an RPG, FF X-2 does not feel any smaller in scope than previous journeys. It shares most directly with the series a return to active time battles (ATB), which have been wisely transformed with things like chain attacks and the dress spheres. The turn-based battle system is absolutely brilliant in pacing and strategic simplicity; because it's so intuitive, we lose track of just how layered the combat really is. The empowerment the system and its reward of experience growth afford is intoxicating. As much as this series has turned into production value and the scintillation of sprawling presentation, Square continues to imbed incredible play mechanics into the experience; outside of the broader foundation, there are little classic gameplay touches all around.

There are a lot of safer games that have come out this year, which is just too bad. Square has taken a risk with Final Fantasy X-2, and even if they don't always hit the mark, when they do, it's a glorious cupid shot right through our FF-loving hearts. **A-**

Final Fantasy fans will find comfort in a very familiar battle system.

"At its most visually striking, it shows us sights we've never seen before..."

Armed and Dangerous

For love and mutton

system xbox, pc
developer planet moon
publisher lucasarts
available december

words dave halverson

Can a thieving bad seed, a munitions-packing mole, a smelly, blind, old sage and a tea-obsessed, sentient, killer droid save Milola from the oppressive rule of the tyranical King Forge and his dim son, Prince Stig? Such a quest is afoot and it may well be the best thing to hit the Xbox since the color green. The Lionhearts—Roman, Jonesy, Rexus and Q—are at the ready...you do have an Xbox don't you? Tell me you have an Xbox.

Armed and Dangerous is what happens when an almost unfairly talented team is left to its own devices, untainted by the rigors of focus testing or trends of any kind to tinker like maniacal elves. This is a game that re-invents nearly everything it does, from weapons fire to storytelling to rescue missions to boost-and-hover gameplay to bold new ways to humiliate farm animals.

Thankfully set in third person, the immensity and overall breadth of the countryside before Roman and company nearly defy description. Forests thick with brush and trees so real you'll want to relieve yourself on them, vast fortresses fitted with elaborate constructs of war, dense villages (and even denser peasants; really, no mutton is safe) and rough-cut mountain passes are all chiseled out in polygonal splendor and coated with the best baked-in textures I've ever seen. The visual prowess at hand ranks among the most impressive console has to offer, emblazoned with turbulent seas crashing on walls, reflection maps and incredible detail all around, and it's got the gameplay to match. For your gaming pleasure, Milola is generously dotted with pubs where the resistance (that's you) can stop in for a pint and, say, a gun that fires great white sharks and such—items that make the search-and-destroy aspects of A&D, in a word (or four), just too much fun. Blowing things up to blow more things up is as common as Q's tea breaks, bombs are at the ready, and at your command, an array of weapons that do everything from fire black holes to turn the world on its ear. You'll need them, too; Forge has battle zeppelins, wall-smashing goliaths and psychotic robots at the ready. Lucky for the Lionhearts, he's also got Stig, gaming's most blithering idiot, by his side. Save it to say, when the cinemas roll, so will you. Armed and Dangerous is funny; not video game funny, but really funny, as in Eddie Izzard funny. Aside from running and gunning to your heart's content (you'll also man turrets, pinging swarms of attackers into the air like circus fleas), recon missions (saving lowly peasants from the clutches of the enemy) and the best sniping this side of a silent scope, Planet Moon have taken the art of boost and hover to soaring new heights. Like playing a gigantic platformer, Roman is able to rocket hundreds of feet in the air, gently sailing down, peppering all comers with a spray of bullets. The physics applied here, along with the line of sight and perfectly tuned control add up to pure guilty pleasure, and they don't merely apply it as a means to attack; titanic platforming is at hand and all I can say is "more, please." All the while, the bagpipes of war mingle within layers of the score—like a dramatic Japanese role-playing score with a playful leprechaun sounding off in the background.

If Planet Moon are the gaming industry's Monty Python (and they are), then this is their Holy Grail. With Armed and Dangerous, Planet Moon fuse the very best play mechanics—as skillfully laid as humanly possible—with stunning visuals, zip codes of immensity and rollicking humor, all with perfect measure, never straying too far or too little in any one direction. You'll see things you never dreamt you'd see, like the flaming carcass of a zeppelin folding over a village after you've blown it out of the sky, and do things you never dreamt you'd do like deliver a sheep...no, wait...like, well...you'll do really neat things! Just when I thought I had this year all sized up, in it swept to take a piss on nearly everything else I've played. Invention is alive and well alright, and safely tucked away at Planet Moon. God help us all. **A**

"This is a game that re-invents nearly everything it does..."

Above: Roman soars in for the proverbial mass killing. Ain't games great?

XIII

system: xbox (reviewed), ps2, gc
developer: ubisoft
publisher: ubisoft
available: november

Did you kill the president? It's gonna take a lot more killing to find out

words brady fiechter

If XIII were to be judged on its effectiveness as a ferocious in-your-face first-person shooter, it would be little more than a casual distraction in the presence of other more intense, better-crafted games. This is a more subdued, adventurous take on the genre, with long-range precision and stealth taking the place of involved, close-quarter shootouts. The game's biggest strength is its stylish, entirely original look, drawn from the visual strokes of the French comic book it's based on.

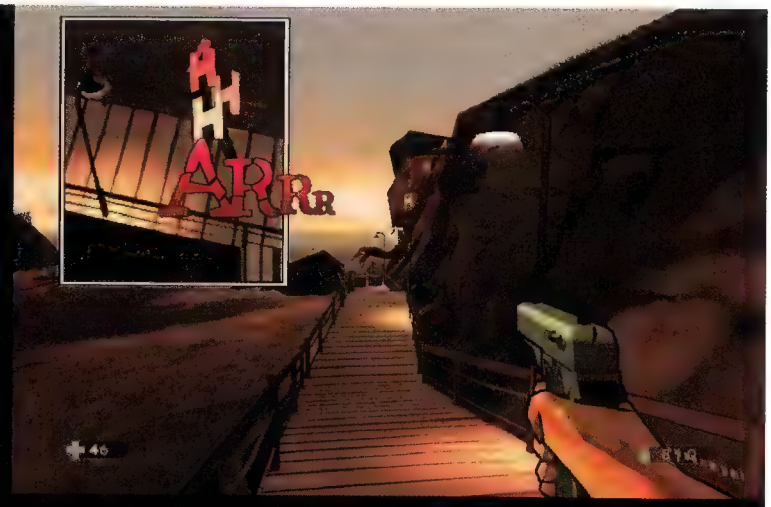
No FPS has ever turned to cel shading to paint its world, but with the striking results XIII has achieved, inevitable followers are welcome. That you've never traversed a setting anything remotely like this one is an obvious plus; that it's all been handled with high flair and distinct craftsmanship demands your attention even when the gameplay reveals its cracks.

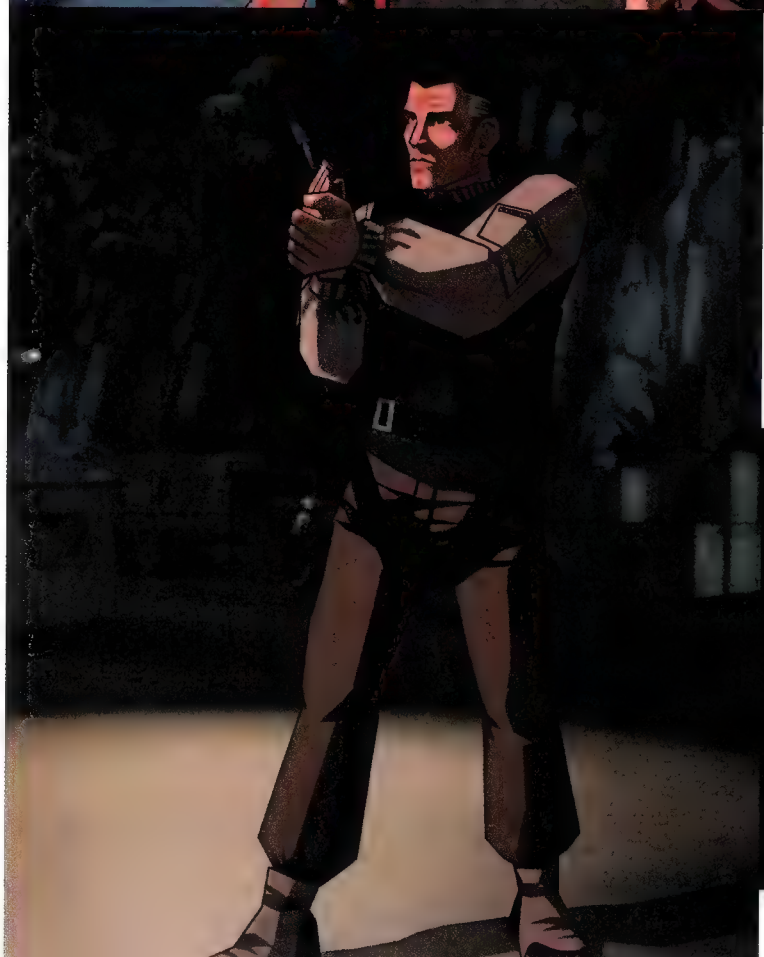
Because the game is going for a comic-book presentation, creative touches have been placed around the basic action. When an enemy is nearby, you see the textual tap-tap-tap of their movement displayed where they're walking. The death from a good headshot is represented in flash-cell panels at the top of the screen, shown through a cool animation of the impact point of the shot. Cutscenes play out with the kinetic splash of a comic book page.

Most of the shots you'll take in XIII require a sniper's touch—expect to become dreadfully intimate with your crossbow. The satisfaction of play comes from cleaning out an area one careful step at a time, dragging bodies into hiding, quietly moving around corners and under perches to maintain alarm silence. Some enemies can be avoided altogether, which is entirely up to your style of play. If you want to stay quiet and are short on ammo, a broomstick, chair or just about anything you can handle as an effective weapon will do the trick. The AI isn't the

DON'T FORGET THE CELEBRITIES!
David Duchovny, Adam West and singer Eve voice key characters.

"Most of the shots...require a sniper's touch—expect to become dreadfully intimate with your crossbow."



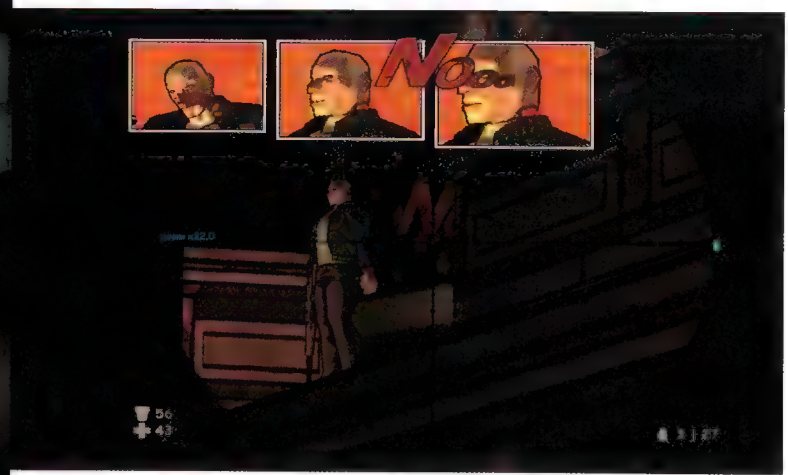


greatest at times, patrolling their scripted paths too fastidiously, resulting in some frustrating expanses when you can't figure out if the designers wanted you to rely on stealth or just waste the entire area. Trial and error starts to weigh in a few areas, but the better-designed levels dominate the sloppy stretches of play.

Given the inspired overall look of the game and its emphasis on a comic-book feel, it's a bit surprising the animation isn't much better. I'm not sure if the spastic enemy death is intentional or just poorly executed, but it doesn't work in providing an engaging sense of impact from your shots. Within the surreal extreme of the setting, exaggerated, flowing animations might seem a prerequisite. But no matter; everything just looks so cool as a whole, you inevitably look past the rough edges and find yourself immersed in XIII's unique reality. Additional aid comes from the propulsive jazzed-up soundtrack and just enough smartly integrated storytelling to maintain a little intrigue along the way.

When XIII succeeds, it succeeds big. When it stumbles, there's always enough to pull us back on solid ground. **B**

Another pinpoint arrow works its magic.



King of Fighters 2000 and 2001

A one-two combo of old-school fighting excellence

words chris hoffman

system: playstation 2
developer: eolith/playmore
publisher: snk
available: november

If you've ever played a King of Fighters game before, then you know what you're getting into with KOF 2000 and 2001. Not a lot of surprises, not a lot to be called revolutionary…just a double-dose of some of the finest fighting gameplay ever. This fighting bonanza might be getting up there in years, but SNK still knows how to rock our Mega Pro-Gear Spec worlds.

As it always has, KOF takes the idea of 2D fighting and nurtures it as both a precise science and an art form. Success or failure is measured in pixels, and gameplay strikes a perfect balance between enjoyable depth and overwhelming complexity. Both games here offer a vast character roster (35 initial characters in 2000, 40 in 2001), from mainstays like Kyo, Iori, Terry and Mai to newcomers like Kula, Ramon, Foxy and Angel, and a wealth of special moves. Coming to grips with the newer characters' nuances takes some time, but that's why diversity is nice. You'll find no simple tap-tap chain combos here; this is all about skill, and fighting purists wouldn't want it any other way. Mechanics are true to their coin-op roots, meaning you'll find strategic enhancements like Armor and Counter modes in KOF 2000, while 4-on-4 fighting is introduced in the 2001 installment.

Birthed from the ancient but resilient Neo Geo hardware, both games suffer from graphics that don't stack up in the modern world, with rough sprites and limited color palettes. KOF 2001 remedies some of the Neo Geo's deficiencies thanks to high-res backgrounds that boast a pre-rendered look (the original backgrounds are unlockable), but it's no Guilty Gear X. Even so, backgrounds are painstakingly hand-drawn and filled with loads of nice touches, like reflections on floors and visible breath in the cold. Some amazing animation is also possible, especially from the boss characters. Zero's flowing robe attacks are one of the most wonderful things I've seen in a 2D fighter. For the record, Mai's animations ain't what they used to be. I hear some people are interested in stuff like that.

Topping off the games are plenty of bonus features. Both games have a Party Mode, essentially a survival mode that is the key to unlocking hidden striker characters and other features. KOF 2000 also has a Memory Mode, where players can glimpse into King of Fighters' past…if they have the mad skills to unlock the content.

For those who are familiar with the fun of King of Fighters, this double-game set will undoubtedly bring back much joy with its better-than-arcade-perfect gameplay and features. Let SNK know how much we appreciate their return; let Sony know that 2D still has a place in this world (and that Metal Slug 3 needs a PS2 release, dang it). SNK is back, and old-school gaming is all the better for it. **B+**

"Not a lot of surprises, not a lot to be called revolutionary…just a double-dose of some of the finest fighting gameplay ever."

2000 Good old Terry Bogard still knows how to kick major ass.

New characters, like freak-boy K9999, add all-new elements to KOF 2001. 2001

Prince of Persia

The Sands of Time

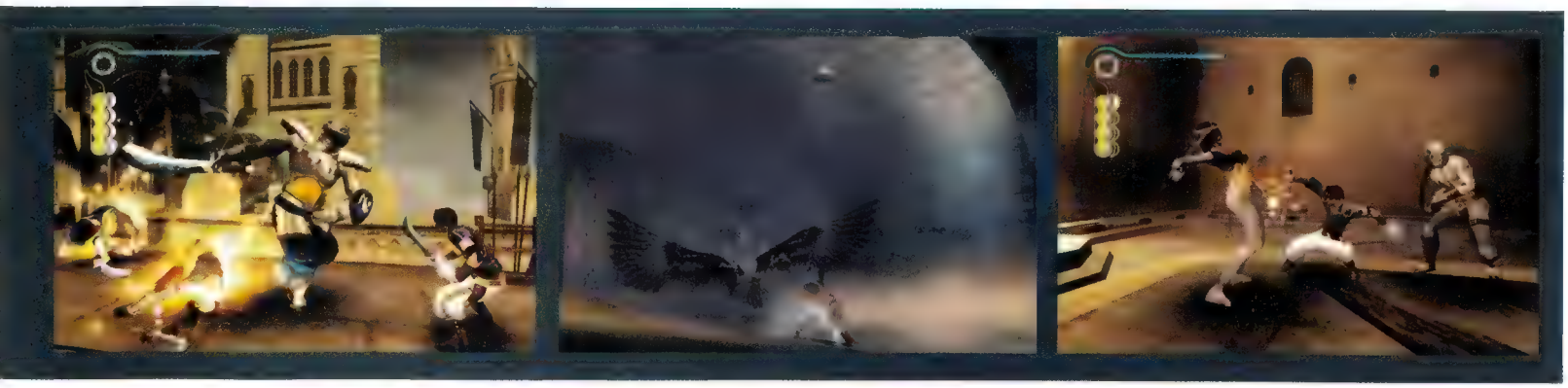
Grace under pressure

system: playstation 2 (reviewed), gamecube, xbox
developer: ubisoft montreal
publisher: ubisoft
available: november

words dave halverson

There's really only one problem with Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time: that it eventually ends. You really couldn't ask for a better update of PoP. Not to say that it's flawless, but as far as capturing the magic of the original (missing in action since the SNES game), Sands of Time exceeds all expectations. The gameplay, a symphony of intuitive control and spectacular animation, is absolutely superb, the level design near Ico-brilliant and the overall package an astounding piece of modern game design and cinematography.

The frustrating thing about PoPs past was do-overs—lots and lots of do-overs. But how to alleviate this while remaining true to the game's edge-of-your-seat physicality? Enter the Sands of Time. The good prince, after being tricked into releasing the sands and subsequently annihilating his beloved father and people, uses limited increments of the magical grains to manipulate (rewind) time, much the way Blinx did, reconstructing recent events so that, in the case you fall to your death or are overcome in battle, you can rewind as many times as your current status allows. Not only does this alleviate the frustration that's plagued the series from day one, but it looks cool as it works. And since modern game design seems to be all about eliminating frustration without dumbing down gameplay, well, kudos to team PoP; this is as close to having your cake and eating it too as I can possibly imagine. The melee system is great as well, if not eerily reminiscent of Kya: Dark Lineage. Intuitive and extremely nuanced, the lock-on mechanism is superb and the attacks more intense by way of packs of enemies that actually



swarm, rather than wait their turn for pummeling. Outside of that, the game is simply a picture of beauty, with intuitive gameplay that gets under your skin and never leaves. The eloquent narrative from the prince himself (took me back to *A Clockwork Orange*) is a nice touch, and the multiple camera angles are the most striking yet functional I've ever witnessed.

What I'm not so wild about is that beyond the rewind, you're given a glimpse of your immediate future at each save point that takes any mystery out of a game that pretty much depends on it. I already can't die; do I really need an onboard strategy guide too? Sure, you can cover your eyes, but given the easy way out, it's human nature to sneak a peek, and this is one game where discovery is half the fun. I also wish the character models were a little cleaner on PS2, and more music would have been nice, plus the dialogue, given the period, seems a bit misplaced if not a bit too tongue-in-cheek—minor grievances considering the game's overall splendor. On Xbox, by the way, the visuals shine brightest.

I never thought I'd see the day the PoP franchise would make a comeback, let alone become a veritable sensation, but after The Sands of Time, I'm thinking anything is possible. This is a brand reborn. **A**

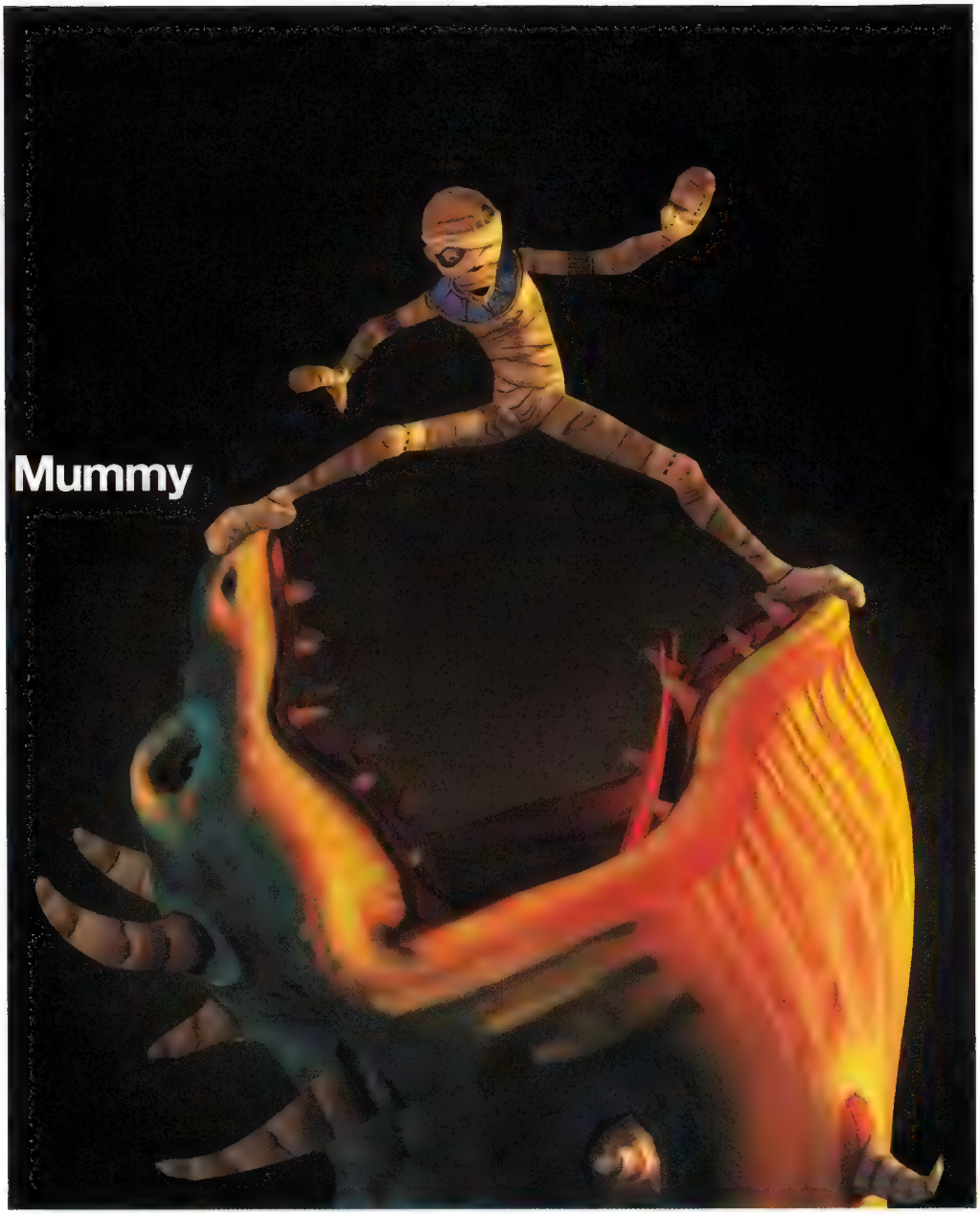
"...the game is simply a picture of beauty, with intuitive gameplay that gets under your skin and never leaves."

Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy

Zelda through the Stargate

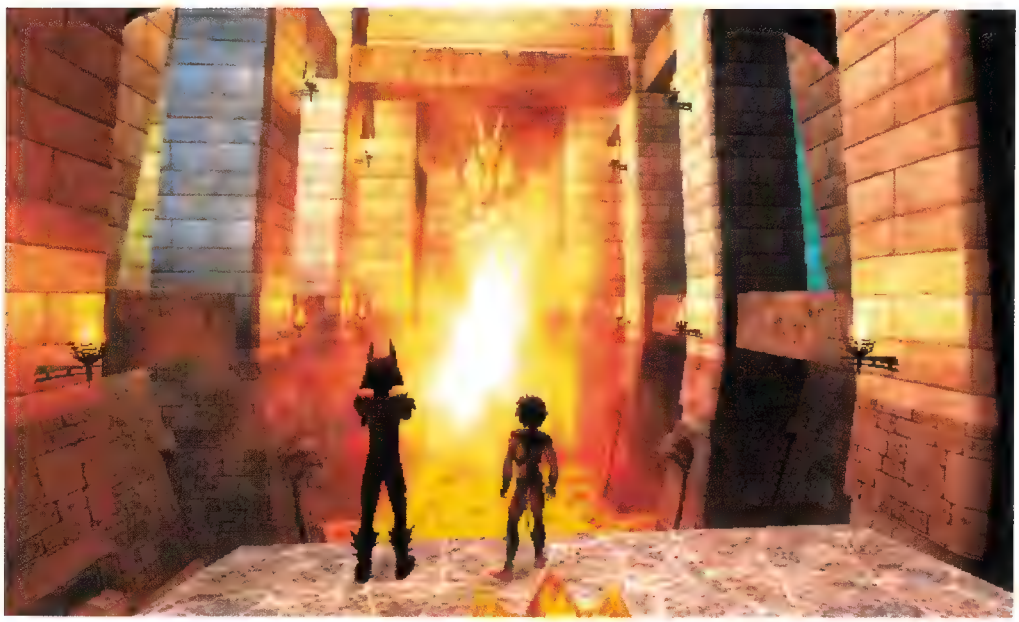
words dave halverson

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: eurocom
publisher: thq
available: november



THQ already has a big, beautiful platformer in their holiday arsenal in Tak and the Power of Juju, so why not follow it up with Eurocom's take on the Zelda franchise and go for adventure gold as well? But can they? Can Eurocom possibly duplicate the majesty of Link and company? That likely depends on whom you talk to. This year's Link, for me, was too automated. Swinging, jumping, the stuff I really relish, was all automatic, and the look, though majestic and wonderfully polished, lacked the wonderment of Ocarina, my vote for King of the Zeldas. Sphinx not only gives the power back to the people, but does so with so much bravado and polish it's almost scary. I know I've been saying this a lot lately, but it's one of the very best games of the year, especially if you're a sucker for massive, progressive adventures. Q4 is just out of control. Platformers and platform-style epics are coming out of the woodwork: Tak, Voodoo Vince, I-Ninja, Jak II, Ratchet & Clank: GC, Metal Arms, Kya: Dark Lineage, Beyond Good and Evil, Prince of Persia and The Hobbit are all here, not to mention Maximo vs. Army of Zin right around the corner. And that's aside from adventure fare like Castlevania, Armed and Dangerous and so on. This is pure madness. Be that as it may, I cannot allow you to miss this game. Return the clothes you get for Christmas and buy Sphinx. Missing it would deprive you of an experience I can't imagine any gamer going without, so I must insist.

The brilliance at work here is twofold as Eurocom turn us loose Egyptian-style as both Sphinx, a magician's apprentice, and Prince Tutankhamen, recently forsaken by his brother (on his birthday, no less; cue Fifty Cent) and left for dead, a lifeless mummy. Off to fetch the Sword of Osiris on unrelated business, Sphinx's path to the portal home is blocked (more like disintegrated), forcing him through a different gateway which lands him in the chamber of the Cursed Palace where he witnesses the treachery of Tutankhamen's brother, much to the horror of Nefertiti who's none too happy about watching her true love turned to dust. Telekinetic news travels fast and, soon after, Sphinx's master, the all-knowing Imhotep, sensing evil is



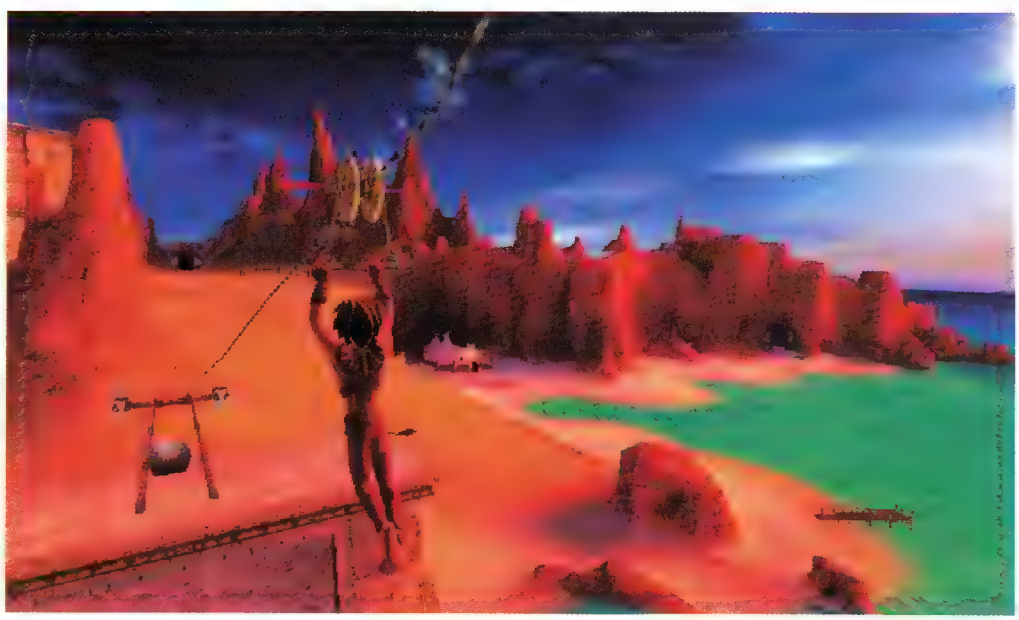
afoot beyond that of mere betrayal (and believe me, it is), begins to work as the conduit for Sphinx and Tutankhamen, guiding them through intertwined goals on parallel paths.

I know Eurocom has mad skills, but everything about Sphinx is a cut above. Both the Prince and especially Sphinx are light-footed and instantly engaging (the models, both main and ancillary, are the smoothest you'll see in the genre, and the characters throughout conceptually brilliant to the core) and the environments are massive in scale, while adorned with perfect collision and nary a poly out of place. Sealing the deal, rather than staking the game's spirit on voice acting, Eurocom has taken the higher ground and employed Zelda-esque animal grunts followed by script, leaving the connotation to the imagination. Sphinx exemplifies the kind of polish that comes from organization, team unity and experience. Few shops can muster this level of gaming.

The free-form gameplay in Sphinx is entirely evolutionary. The way forward is never clearly defined but comes naturally through discovery—unforced, without the use of arrows or blatant prodding—the kind of progression found in only the best games. Sphinx himself begins empty-handed, but soon becomes master of the blowpipe, Capture Beetles (which allow you to capture, use and sell assorted indigenous creatures), sword, shield and zip line, while the Prince offers a different, yet similarly engaging style. Both characters spend the bulk of their time solving complex action puzzles. The difference lies in the combat. Sphinx has the sword and shield of Osiris by his side, while the Prince has only his wits, deadness and occasional supernatural power to guide him. Since he's technically deceased—running on magic until Sphinx can collect the urns that contain his spirit—he has to work with what he's got, which is namely an animated cloth-wrapped corpse: burn him (the old human candle), electrocute him, smash him wafer-thin, dump him off huge precipices...whatever gets the job done. I was a little concerned initially that sharing the limelight might break the flow, but the branching storyline is so well conceived and enthralling that I relished every twist and turn.

This game is, simply put, brilliant. The music is intoxicating, the locales magical and the overall vibe decidedly dreamy. What's better is that Eurocom tailored each version to maximize the respective hardware, resulting in a quality experience across the board. **A-**

"The music is intoxicating, the locales magical and the overall vibe decidedly dreamy."



Sphinx takes off on a zip line in one of the game's many massive regions.

Kya

Dark Lineage

She's a lean, teen, fighting machine

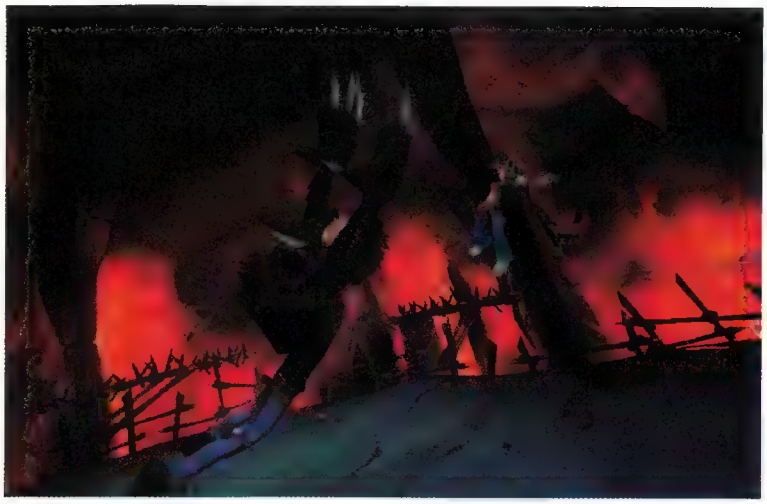
words dave halverson

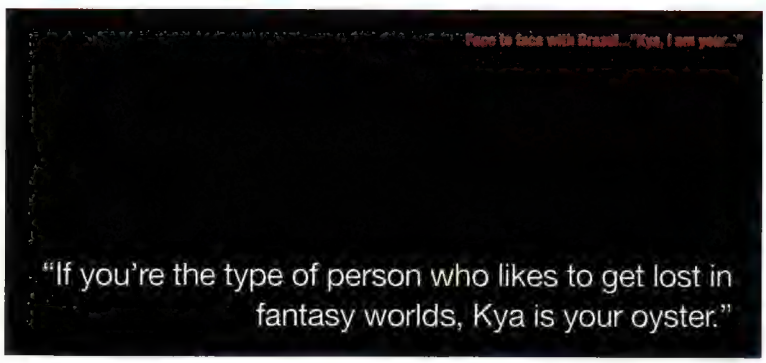
system: playstation 2
developer: eden studios
publisher: atari
available: november

A melting pot of adventure and platform aesthetics built on an epic core, Kya: Dark Lineage has exceeded my expectations. Based on bits of preview code I'd seen over the past year, I was confident Kya would be good game, but envisioned it more along the beaten path, when, in fact, Eden has picked up the dust-covered gauntlet left by Rare, Naughty Dog, Insomniac and Nintendo—who all opted to stray from the epic platformer mold this year—and brought us '03's all-encompassing platforming epic de jour.

The gamescape—a parallel universe concealed behind a brick wall in Kya's living room—hinges on a village occupied by curious beasts called Nativs, a race of peace-loving creatures currently residing on the endangered species list thanks to Brazul, the evil ruler who is systematically capturing and mutating them into Wolfens—hybrid beasts of his own design. Kya's half-brother Frank enters the warp first and lands smack-dab in downtown Brazul (serves him right…he's the one who tore down the damn wall) while Kya fares much better, escaping the Wolfen scouts with the aid of the Nativs, where she becomes their last hope, and vice-versa. As Kya frees Nativ souls from their Wolfen hosts—via a snappy-looking exorcism ritual—they scurry home to open more shops in the village where Kya can then return to purchase new Boomies (her hairclip/weapon of choice) and other items to evolve her quiver of melee attacks, as well as breach previously blocked paths, much akin to the progression in Metroid Prime.

Games of this ilk are made and/or subsequently broken by several things, namely the universe, character design, frame rate, music and, of course, play mechanics. No one wants to spend 30 hours doing the same thing over and over, and there's nothing so torturous as great gameplay that you're not particularly fond of looking at or listening to. This being their maiden voyage in arguably the most challenging category there is (they've only made racing games up to now), you'd think Eden Studios might hit a couple of snags, especially given a paltry two years to do what usually takes far more, but somehow they've managed to succeed on pretty much every level. The game's PS2 pedigree holds it back to some degree (mostly in the modeling department), and there are some collision chads hanging about, but all things considered, this is an impressive maiden voyage. An Xbox version would surely alleviate Kya's technical woes. Most importantly, Eden has created a world, indigenous life and conveyances that engulf the player, and builds on that foundation progressively through diverse gameplay, wonderfully devised homegrown mechanisms and surreal visuals. If you're the type of person who likes to get lost in fantasy worlds, Kya is your oyster. There's so much to do. Magic-boarding down natural half pipes, free-floating through vertical and horizontal wind chutes (they do a lot of very

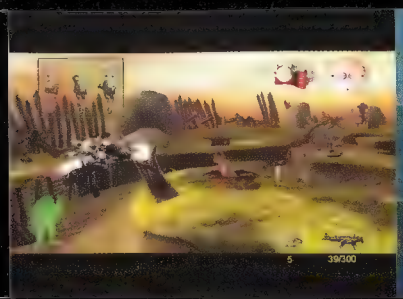




cool things with wind in Kya), riding Jamguts (Tauntaun-like creatures)—and the combat is outstanding. Hey, give me a beast to ride in the first place and I'm in heaven, but these Jamguts are damn cool—reminiscent of Peace's mighty steed in Wizards. And when you're not fighting, riding or gliding, Kya really soars—a cornucopia of platforming puzzles and discovery, filled with every hook in the book and then some. You'll also notice a network of variables at work keeping you on track, pointing the way to the latest shop or area you need to concentrate on, as well as a comprehensive map. While I normally balk at visual aids, I must say, they're welcome here; this is an immense game.

Like all the best, Kya's a game you take up residence in rather than merely play, especially considering its bounty of side quests, open transit between worlds and addictive nature. I tip my hat to Eden Studios for a job very, very well done, and hope to see lots more of Kya in the future. If she looks this great in her teens I can only imagine what future developments might bring. **B+**

reviews



Game of the Month

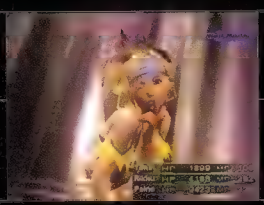
Armed and Dangerous ..p.068

Planet Moon's latest is a stunner of a game packed with comical gameplay, high production values and mutton.

Also notice...

Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy
p.076

A double dose of Zelda-style gameplay playing as either Sphinx or a gauzy Tutankhamen!



FF X-2
p.066

The sequel the world has been waiting for has arrived. Playing with girls just got Squared.

Mario Party 5

system gamecube
developer hudson
publisher nintendo
available november

words michael hobbs

One could accuse Nintendo and Hudson of cranking these things out. After all, this series debuted on the N64, and we're already up to number five here. At that rate, we would have had Super Mario Sunshine 4 by now. Regardless, they can continue to crank them out, because they are always good, Mario Party 5 in particular. A couple of key differences in its play change things greatly on the board, making it a little less of a free for all and allowing a touch more strategy into the play. In addition, the playing fields are now fully 3D, making them much more alive and dynamic than before. But as always, the real draw here are the minigames, and as always, they are all new. Of course, some are variations on themes passed down, but there are more than enough that surprise and delight to no end. **B+**

Over 70 all new mini-games are here for your pleasure.

Celebrity Deathmatch

system xbox (reviewed), ps1, ps2
developer big ape productions
publisher gotham games
available october

words chris hoffman

Mr. T killing Carrot Top. Mr. T killing Jerry Springer. Mr. T killing Miss Cleo. Yes, I believe Celebrity Deathmatch might very well have the best concept ever for a video game. But is it any good? Well…kinda. Though the gameplay is simple button-mashing and the moves seem to come out at random, CD's style compensates for substance. The game actually looks and feels like the TV show, complete with some authentic voiceovers, comically gruesome action and the ability to actually be funny. Too bad there's no match variety and the custom character mode bites. From a pure gameplay standpoint, I can't recommend CD, but when you take into account the humor, the budget price and the ability to beat your (least) favorite celebrity into a bloody clay pulp, there's certainly fun to be had. **C**

Space Channel 5 Special Edition

system playstation 2
developer sega
publisher agetec
available november

words christina alexander

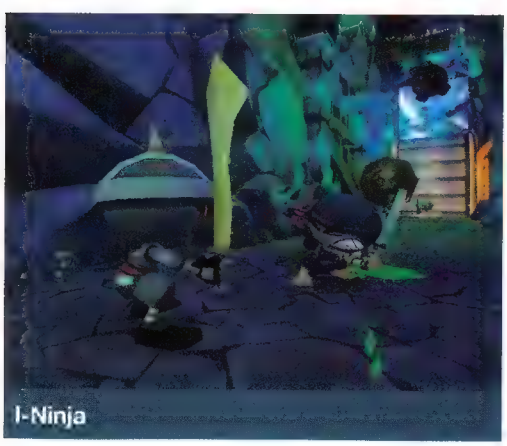
After a huge wait, the charming Ulala finally returns in a new Space Channel 5. Space Channel 5 part 2 plays exactly like the first; however, Sega has managed to add better music, slightly updated graphics and new elements to keep the gameplay feeling fresh. While I was appreciative of and enthusiastic about these new aspects, they also end up being some of the largest stumbling blocks of the game. Facing off with Pudding while playing a guitar and trying to do exactly as she does is just one of these blocks. Something as simple as trying to discern whether Pudding is motioning right, left, up or down with her guitar is almost frustrating enough for a good controller toss. The Special Edition also includes the first Space Channel 5 game just in case you missed it on the Dreamcast. **B-**

Spawn: Armageddon

system playstation 2, xbox, gamecube
developer point of view
publisher namco
available november

words dave halverson

Rather than build on the adventure elements via Spawn's awesome otherworldly prowess, Point of View spiral into the tedious "clear area and move on" trap that really has to be visually arresting and nuanced to take hold—and in Spawn's case, even given his cool array of moves, the balance just isn't there. When different beasts attack simultaneously (which is often), the control just can't hang, resulting in way too many do-overs/frustration towards the end of the game when Necroplasm is sparse and the enemy relentless. The action is pretty meaty otherwise, just not enough so to hang the entire game on. On the visual side, the constant 60fps is nice and the characters are nicely modeled, but the environments never shed their sterility. Not bad, but not real good either. **C+**



I-Ninja

system ps2, gc
developer argonaut
publisher namco
available november (ps2), december (gc)

words dave halverson

If rich visuals, stunning environments and the most diversity-packed gameplay of this year or any other sound good to you, I have a ninja for you to meet. Sure he has a big head, but he's got every reason. This game is, in a word (or four), too much damn fun. The world as we know it just doesn't deserve I-Ninja. For those who appreciate this greatest of genres (that being pure action and lots of it in every conceivable form, plugged into spectacular visuals and music), go get this game right now. Wall-running, chain-swinging (like you've never seen it), hovering, grinding, human half pipe, giant robots, turret sorties, chases, races...this game has everything, and it is all fun and spirited to the core. What begins as good gets great fast and then segues into "more please." **A-**

If you look far enough you can see the sequel! Soak it all in, Ninja, soon the shuriken will again fly.

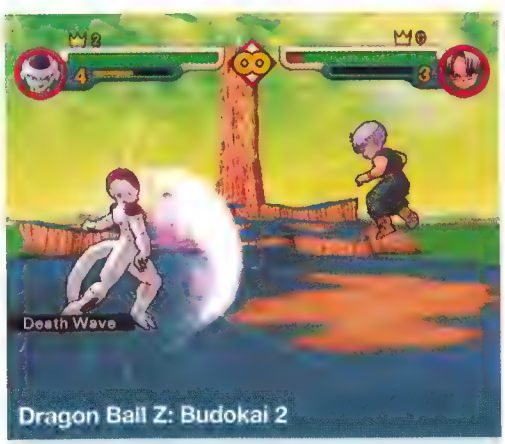
Grabbed by the Ghoulies

system xbox
developer rare
publisher microsoft
available october

words dave halverson

Bouncing around the press you may have gotten the impression that the MGS/Rare marriage got off to a rocky start, when in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Sure the first games are more GC than Xbox in origin—we expected that—but that doesn't make them any less Rare. Give GbtG a chance and you'll see the brilliance shine through in the game's simplistic yet masterfully layered scenarios—a storybook excursion, playfully haunting in the Gruntilda vein that unfolds in masterful Rare fashion. Granted, this isn't the next Jet Force Gemini, but it's not meant to be. GbtG is a smorgasbord of visual bliss, superb animation and a level of arcade-style design that channels the spirit and fun of Smash TV, bringing that stickiness into the modern era—and what could be cooler than that? **B+**

Look! It's a mummy shot!



Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 2

system playstation 2
developer dimps
publisher atari
available november

words chris hoffman

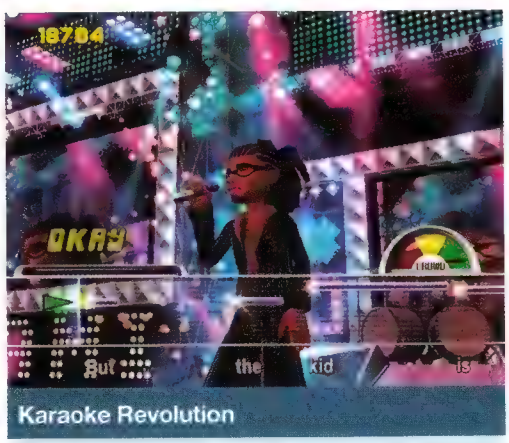
The fact that there even is a Dragon Ball Z: Budokai 2 is a testament to the fact that a strong license holds more power in the video game market than good gameplay. Budokai 2 takes the shallow one-on-one fighting action of its predecessor and repackages it with essentially no noteworthy enhancements to the fighting engine or visuals. While the past year should have been spent beefing up the gameplay department (maybe adding, say, the ability to duck or jump or fly on command), they've instead added a unique but noncompelling story mode that plays like a repetitious board game. Budokai 1 was lacking as well, but at least it catered to fans with its re-creation of the TV show via nice cutscenes…this doesn't even throw out that bone. Disappointing. **C-**

SWAT: Global Strike Team

system playstation 2, xbox
developer argonaut
publisher vu games
available october

words brady fiechter

There's nothing about SWAT you haven't seen presented in a first-person shooter many times over and many times better, leaving the biggest draw to the team-based component. Either through the headset or D-pad, commands are given to your buddies for help with working on disarming chaotic situations otherwise too sticky to survive solo. Problem is, your guys are often too effective, and there's really not much strategy to sending them into a firestorm. The most interesting shakeup to the action is the emphasis being placed on incapacitating thugs instead of always going in with guns set on blood-thirsty kill, but this idea works much better in theory, growing old fast and never playing out like you might expect. The game looks kind of dated too, yearning for some major touchups. **C+**



Karaoke Revolution

system playstation 2
developer harmonix
publisher konami
available november

words christina alexander

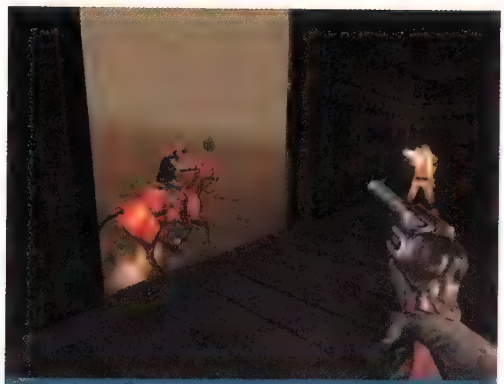
You knew it was coming. Konami's Bemani series has allowed fans to dance, play the piano and pound the drums, so it was only a matter of time before Karaoke Revolution was born. Using the PS2 microphone, KR breaks new ground and brings the fun of karaoke home to your own living room where only your friends and pets are subjected to your special version of "Billy Jean." You don't have to be Whitney Houston to beat the game, but doing your best impression of a cat in heat won't get you a gold record. The real fun of KR is in multi-player mode, as two to eight players can compete for top honors. Best of all, the song list, spanning over three decades worth of popular American music, contains easily recognizable and fun songs for anyone raised here in the States. **A-**

Midway Arcade Treasures

system playstation 2, xbox
developer digital eclipse
publisher midway
available november

words chris hoffman

The problem with Midway Arcade Treasures certainly isn't the gameplay. With 24 classic arcade hits covering a wide variety of genres, there's a whole lot of gaming history here to enjoy. The trouble lies in the presentation and the way the games were seemingly rushed without being optimized for console. Not only is the interface clumsy and hard to view, but the bonus content is poorly edited and sloppily thrown together. However, the bigger problem is that many of these games just don't work well on console as they are; a number of them had pedals, trackballs and other unique controls that don't translate well to a controller, and acceptable alternatives are lacking. In other respects, the games are emulated flawlessly, but most of them are only fun for their nostalgic value. **C+**



Dead Man's Hand

system xbox
developer human head
publisher atari
available december

words brady fiechter

Dead Man's Hand's western theme goes a long way in keeping the game alive in the mire of mechanical level design and action sequences that quickly lose their impact, but that initial appeal melts away once you feel like you're just going through the motions. There's a cartoon approach to the combat and presentation that kind of works at first, but again, it all comes to a halt once the old-school charm wears thin. This is such simple design all around, and while the most hardcore of the hardcore first-person shooter fan might find fleeting entertainment in somewhat of a throwback effort, the rest won't be able to get past the low-end production. A nice touch is the detailed physics added to almost everything in the environment, shooting up the area and crushing enemies with downed objects. **C**

Looney Tunes: Back in Action

system playstation 2, gamecube
developer warthog
publisher ea
available november

words dave halverson

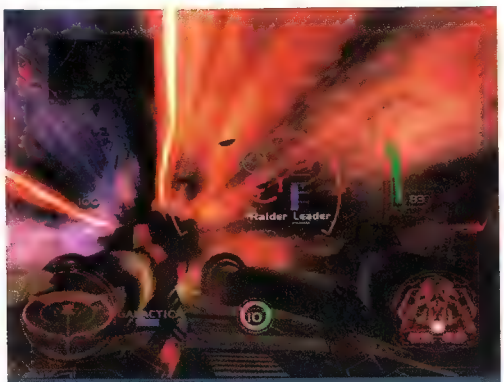
Warthog has bravely taken the business of Looney Tunes, arguably the toughest brand to conquer, to heart. It's a cartoon, sure, but its followers are 30-plus, so what to do? Well, how about taking all of the zaniness and banter of the Bugs Bunny/Daffy Duck feud and plugging it into a big Acme scavenger hunt with an emphasis on exploration, platforming and big-ass hammers?! I do, I say, I do think they've got themselves a game here. The tag-team approach works like a charm, the visuals are uncannily spot-on and the dialogue sheer perfection. This is the cartoon come to life. Granted, the game has simplistic intentions—no one's inventing the wheel here—but it does the Looney Tunes proud and, damnit doc, they deserve it. **B-**

Goblin Commander: Unleash the Horde

system ps2, xbox, gamcube
developer jaleco
publisher jaleco
available november

words dave halverson

If only Goblin Commander's visuals matched the majesty of its design... Obviously crafted as a PS2 lead, the character and world design are awesome but on the blocky side, with not-so-great textures. That doesn't take away from the fact that I absolutely love it, though. I just think Jaleco should have juiced the Xbox version. Where's my bump mapping, damn it!? Breaking the RTS genre out of its tired, overused mold, the brothers Millar have taken everything great about the kind, simplified it and made it intriguing through…of all things...action! Hallelujah! The interface is brilliant, the ambience and story ogre-ific (orc-tastic?) and the overall breadth of the gameplay satisfying on many levels. This is a foundation worth building on in more ways than one. Bring on the stuff! **B+**



Battlestar Galactica

system ps2, xbox
developer warthog
publisher vu games
available november

words michael hobbs

Set 40 years before the original series and starring a young Adama (Lorne Greene on the original show), Battlestar Galactica the game is an almost rote melding of Colony Wars and Rogue Squadron. Not bad places to crib from, one must say, but BSG never quite reaches the heights of the games it emulates. Blame slightly unnatural control and a rather generic feeling which probably has more to do with Battlestar Galactica having a less than rich aesthetic pool from which to draw from; they overflow with riches at Factor 5. Certainly Battlestar Galactica tries, with layers complexity folded into the play, like on-the-fly customization of missiles, but things like this make the game more intricate, but they don't make it any more fun. **C+**

SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs II

system playstation 2
developer zipper interactive
publisher sony online entertainment
available november

words michael hobbs

What a great, overachieving sequel this is. Zipper Interactive have filled SOCOM II with so many enhancements, you would need an online-length article to describe them all. Basically, they've taken everything that was wrong or even remotely wrong in the original and either fixed it or greatly enhanced it. Here is some of it: a new ranking system allows you to set up online games with exclusively novice or exclusively expert level players; the 12 new maps are much more involved in their design, featuring destructible objects like bridges and barricades in addition to fixed turrets and other strategy-enhancing elements; two new types of missions join the fray (Breach and Escort) and the one-player AI has been greatly enhanced. Out of space. Go play it. **A**

DDR Ultramix

system xbox
developer kce hawaii
publisher konami
available november

words christina alexander

By far one of the better releases of the DDR series, Ultramix is both a must-own for DDR freaks and a great place for newbs to get acquainted with this popular line of games. Ultramix features several single- and multi-player modes of play, including the entertaining and calorie-burning Workout Mode and the demanding Challenge Mode. While Workout Mode turns your living room into an aerobic studio, Challenge Mode offers the chance for players to prove themselves in some of the finer and more technical points of DDR. And hey, after a tough game of Halo, what better way to blow off steam than to dance away your cares to "Castle in the Sky"? **B+**

Time Crisis 3

system playstation 2
developer namco
publisher namco
available october

words michael hobbs

You probably don't need to read this review. If you love the Time Crisis series, you've no doubt rushed out and gotten Time Crisis 3 already, having assumed that Namco haven't mucked it up. If so, you were right. Not only have Namco not mucked it up, they've gone and delivered the most entertaining entry in the series to date. As always, the gameplay is built around the concept of ducking behind obstacles and popping out to dole out lead, but this formula shows no signs of age as the designers deftly arrange everything just so to ensure maximum excitement and fun from the shooting action. Some powerful new weapons have been added in TC3, along with some additional side quests and detail tweaks to the gameplay, but this is still the same Time Crisis you know and love. And of course, we only recommend play with the GunCon 2. **B+**

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3

system xbox
developer ubisoft montreal
publisher ubisoft
available november

words brady fiechter

Console gamers aren't as seasoned as the PC audience when it comes to the kind of complex team-play contained in a game like Rainbow Six 3, the excellent PC-to-Xbox port of original release early this year, subtitled Raven Shield. So if you're new to this style of military action, don't hesitate to make this engaging game your first outing. Ding Chavez is back, commanding a squad of smart commandos to fight the onslaught of terrorism in 2007. His job is heavier on the action than a similar game like Splinter Cell, but the missions are still driven by slower, calculated strategy. Taking cover is a big part of the play mechanic, leaving some of the dirtier work to your teammates as you send them in to clear the path to the next industrial-dominated area. While the game is satisfying in single-player, it really takes off online. **B+**

Secret Weapons Over Normandy

system ps2, xbox
developer totally games
publisher lucasarts
available november

words tom ham

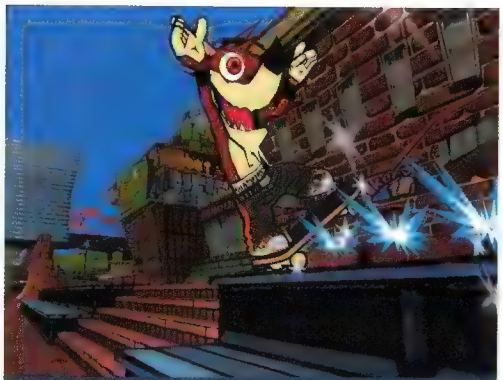
If you're like me, you're probably not into flight sims. Having to worry about gauges, monitors, flaps and other nonsense isn't my idea of fun. Thankfully, LucasArts have traded in realism for arcade action and the end result is a joyous ride through history. The game starts in 1940 with the evacuation of Dunkirk and then goes through historically accurate WWII missions and situations before finishing up with the invasion of Normandy in 1944. SWON is a dogfight lover's dream. Quick turns, loops, straight dives—it's all about quick reflexes. Adding to the excitement are cool special effects such as zoom, the ability to slow time and dynamic camera angles—which gives the game a very Hollywood feel. Michael Bay, eat your heart out. Although the game supports split-screen multiplay, there is no online multiplayer, which is a real bummer. **B+**

Frogger's Adventures: The Rescue

system playstation 2, gamecube
developer kce hawaii
publisher konami
available october

words chris hoffman

I confess, I've kind of been out of the Frogger loop since I played the original in the arcades and on the 2600 about two decades ago. I did have an unfortunate run-in with The Great Quest a couple years back, but I'm trying to forget that. So I had no expectations when I popped Frogger's Adventures: The Rescue into my console. What I discovered was a substantially entertaining game that maintains the classic sensibilities of the original, building upon them, expanding the concept, evolving it into an inspired yet uncomplicated action-puzzler. The cutscenes are better off skipped and there's nothing mind-blowing at work here, but the levels are clever, the bosses nicely creative and the mix of thinking and skill-based gameplay fun. If that's what you're looking for, Frogger's got it. **B-**



Go! Go! Hypergrind

system gamecube
developer team poponchi
publisher atlus
available november

words dave halverson

You certainly can't accuse Atlus of being ordinary, as they are in possession of perhaps the year's weirdest game. Barring Gregory Horror showing up, they've cornered the market on quirky in 2003. What could be sillier than entering Spumco stunt school and competing for fame in the shape of a starring role in their next production by garnering negative reactions and appeasing your abusive director? I'll tell you what: doing it on a skateboard, playing as a deranged animal, infant or thing, shredding among giant mammaries or being spat from fatality to fatality, linking moves that dismember your character. Ren and Stimpy would be proud! The animation is a tad stiff, and the control takes some time to master given the state of the characters, but GGH is surprisingly addictive. **B-**

Crash Nitro Kart

system ps2, xbox, gamcube
developer vicarious visions
publisher vu games
available november

words brady fiechter

Now that Mario Kart: Double Dash!! is out and you, the wise, avid kart-racing fan, are playing the crap out of it, is there room for another colorfully playful entry in the genre this year? You betcha! There are so few options from the past several years even worth the bargain-bin price that when a decent title like Crash Nitro Kart comes along, you gotta take it through its energetic paces, whatever the obvious shortcomings—which here aren't so bad that the game masks the moments of fun. You know what to expect: the Crash universe lends its charm to racing, with all the characters, visual parallels, sounds and flavors from the orange marsupial's platforming stints building the circuit. It's all a little generic and heavily recycled, but the powerslide system from CTR pulls it together. **B-**

Gladiator

system ps2, xbox
developer acclaim
publisher acclaim
available november

words brady fiechter

I have a weakness for developers showing me entirely new visual techniques, willing to work around serious flaws for the sake of being wowed. Take Gladiator: if not for the striking lighting effects underpinning the rousing setting of a dreamlike mythological Greece, the game would barely hold my interest for a few of its most rudimentary levels. There's nothing wrong with simple two-button combat in the spirit of the classic hack 'n' slash, but there *is* something wrong with making it so mechanical and lifelessly staged. Every level contains a handful of switches that open doors that lead to creatures falling from boxes and jumping from the ground that lead to a really big creature that gives you some new device with which to slaughter more creatures. **C**

There's no shortage of blood and flying limbs.

Sega Ages Vol. 5: Golden Axe

words chris hoffman

Sega's classic is new but not improved

system: playstation 2

developer: 3D ages

publisher: sega

Recently released in Japan, Sega's 3D PlayStation 2 remake of Golden Axe captures the essence of the original arcade game in a title that harkens back to simpler days when games didn't need to be 40-hour epics with 10,000-poly models to be a success. The best way to put it is that the new Golden Axe is based on the arcade original and subsequent Genesis port. Fans of the original will instantly recognize the three heroes, the locales, the spells, the dragon steeds and the enemies, as well as the pure, unadulterated hack 'n' slash fun that goes with them. Though similar, the particulars are different: levels are longer and feature new areas, there are more foes to face, and enemies like magicians and spear warriors are all-new. Other more subtle, but perhaps more important, changes to the underlying systems are also at work: changes in animations, ranges of attacks, timings and priorities that give the game a distinctly different, less polished, feel. Visually, the new Golden Axe looks primitive, like an old PlayStation 1 game in hi-res. On the other hand, the music has been redone using the full power of the PS2, and the results are beautiful. Those expecting an enhancement of the original game will be disappointed, but those looking for a game that captures the essence of the arcade classic are in luck.

This gnarly minotaur boss is one of the many changes made to Golden Axe

PC Genjin (Bonk's Adventure)

words dave halverson

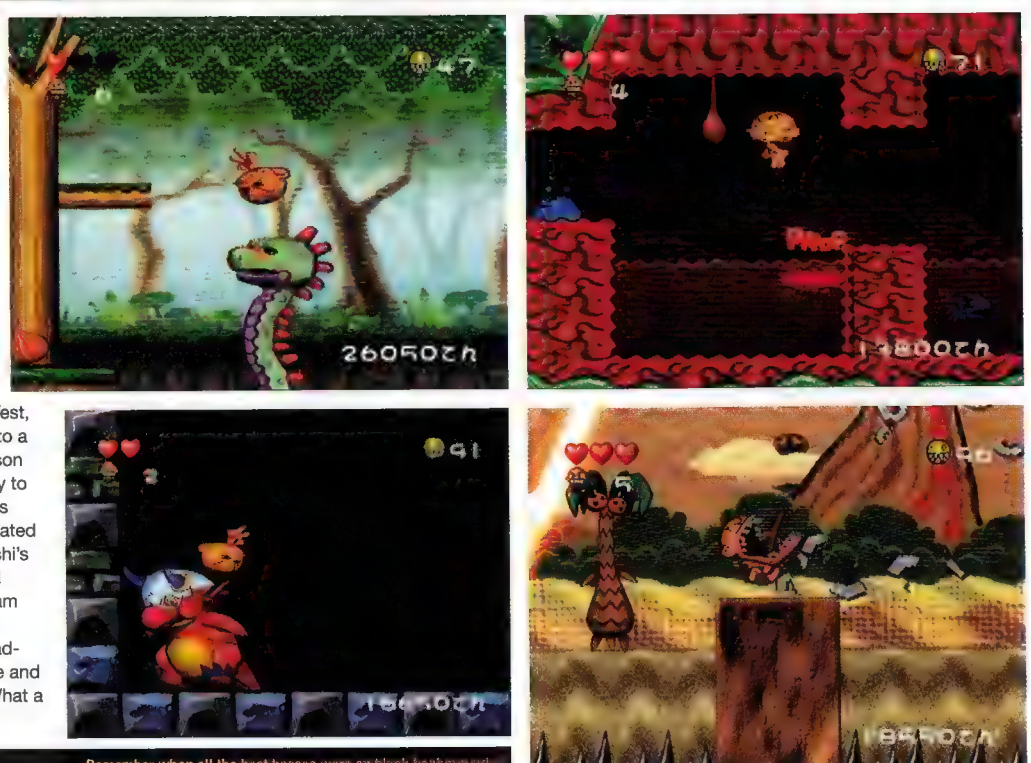
Going Bonk in time

system: playstation 2

developer: hudson

publisher: nec

Once a bustling pool of opportunity, the import market has become a very different animal of late. If a game so much as has a chance of making it in the West, it's bought and paid for day one and often available in the States before its point of origin. Be that as it may, there are still those fantastic little glimmers of freshness that can only emanate from a free market like Japan's. The Hudson collection Bonk redux is such a glimmer. Anyone around at the dawn of the 16-bit wars surely remembers Bonk, NEC's answer to Sonic and Mario. Initially formulated for a world audience with an eye on the West, by the third installment, the crazed caveman would evolve into a full-blown, kiss-blowing freak as the game for some odd reason began to recoil through the years, disappearing into obscurity to such an extent that it remains one of the few mega-franchises never resurrected for a 3D comeback. In this remake, an updated carbon copy of the original head basher, Hudson apply a Yoshi's Island-like fabric veneer to the scrolling layers of background while rendering Bonk and company in 3D, an strange amalgam given the inability to accurately portray the 2D bosses in 3D due to their extreme oddness. Graphic update aside, the head-bangin', cliff-chewin', combo-bopping Bonk aesthetic is alive and well once again, along with a sweetly remixed soundtrack. What a fantastic way to trip down memory lane.



Remember when all the best bosses were on black backgrounds

Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne

How a sequel should be done

developer: remedy
publisher: rockstar games
available: october

words tom ham

This sequel is more graphic novel than computer game—there's even a love story here to complicate the violent life of New York City cop Max Payne. Still haunted by the murder of his family, the trigger-happy Payne finds himself thrust anew into the city's corrupt underworld. Conversations between characters, messages left on answering machines, flashbacks and comic-book-style vignettes all advance this involved plot. The action is relatively unchanged from before—Max pretty much kills anything and everything that moves—but the physics get more interesting here. Just about every object in the game reacts to force (shoot at somebody behind a shelf and the bottles on the shelf go flying), and rag-doll physics provide more realistic endings for the bad guys by sending their bodies tumbling down stairs or falling off the tops of buildings. The graphics paint a pretty picture of this ugly business, with detailed backgrounds, stutter-free animations and accurately modeled faces. Max Payne 2 also upgrades its Matrix-esque bullet-time feature. Before, it simply allowed Max to slow down time briefly for everyone, himself included; now, as he gets more proficient, he can continue moving at full speed while everybody else is locked into slow-mo. That might seem unfair, but when you're being attacked by a squad of thugs with automatic weapons, every little bit helps. Unfortunately, the game itself suffers from its own time distortion: I finished the whole thing in 12 hours. The survive-as-long-as-you-can "Dead Man Walking" mode, however, can make a second or third go-round worthwhile. A-

Max dishes out the pain, and looks damn good doing it.

Call of Duty

This World War II shooter is something special

developer: infinity ward
publisher: activision
available: october

words tom ham

Call of Duty is one of those rare action titles that not only delivers on what it promises—it surpasses all expectations. Although it may appear to be like every other WWII shooter on the market today, playing this game is like embracing greatness—a crowning achievement in game design that very few action titles can deliver on. Not only is it an outstanding game in its own right, in many ways it's far superior to any comparable game to date.

Call of Duty's distinguishing feature is the lack of a lead character. In games like Medal of Honor and Return to Castle Wolfenstein, the action centered on a single hero who was always the one responsible to turn the tide of the war. In Call of Duty there are no heroes—everyone is the same—just a soldier working with other soldiers, fighting for a cause. Good move? Absolutely. A WWII veteran once told me, "Glory is best when shared with your fellow soldier, not standing alone."

The single-player game is split into three separate campaigns—American, British and Russian—each taking place in a different part of Europe. While the American initiative involves lots of squad-based combat, the British campaign is centered on espionage and infiltration. My favorite, the Russian campaign, involves hordes of troops rushing against a deadly Nazi threat. Even though all of the various missions in each campaign are set up in a coherent, linear fashion, the transitions between each campaign are a bit abrupt. An epilogue of some sort would've given each campaign a stronger impact. I'm not trying to be nitpicky, but with the game being so superb on this many levels, you would think the developers would've thought this through. Does it detract from the game? Not really. But it's definitely worth noting.

After I finished Call of Duty, I was exhausted, literally. This is, without question, an action-lover's action game—an experience so visceral, you'll want to go back and do it again. From the first mission to the last, the single-player campaign never lets up. Utilizing lots of scripted scenarios and excellent character interaction, each mission has been brilliantly laid out to give players the best seat in the house. No surprise there—the developer, Infinity Ward, has some of the same team members that worked on Medal of Honor: Allied Assault.

While the single-player campaign will only last a mere 10 hours or so, the multiplayer component is what players will keep coming back for. Besides the typical Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch modes, Call of Duty has three additional modes that are pretty cool. The first is Behind Enemy Lines; this scenario puts a small band of Allied forces against a much larger Nazi force. In addition, there are two Counter-Strike-esque team-based objective scenarios—Retrieval and Search and Destroy. With 12 multiplayer maps in all (most of which can be used for all scenarios), there is plenty here to keep players busy.

One of the most interesting aspects of the multiplayer game is the "Kill-Cam"—an ingenious way for players to see not only who killed them, but how. Basically, after you get killed, the game automatically shifts perspectives to the person who just killed you. Lasting only five seconds, the Kill-Cam will point out to players (via a white arrow) where they were before they got offed.

Although Call of Duty uses a heavily modified version of the Quake III engine, the game looks far from dated. Characters are incredibly modeled and the animations are top-notch. Special effects such as explosions, weather and smoke truly make the game's environments come to life. Adding to the visual impact is the inclusion of blood (something that was noticeably absent from Medal of Honor). Granted, it's not gushing, but it makes significant impact that most players would appreciate.

The true star of the game is the audio. Medal of Honor set the standard and now Call of Duty has just raised it, considerably. Granted, awesome graphics will suck you into a game, but killer audio is what totally immerses you in the world. Not only does every weapon have a distinct sound, but you'll know exactly what's being fired at you at any given time. Supporting 5.1 audio, you'll hear bullets whiz by your head and ricochet behind you. It's almost embarrassing how many times I actually ducked in front of my monitor.

Call of Duty is an extraordinary game that any action fan will go nuts over. Everything from the graphics to the sound to the action itself, Infinity Ward and Activision have taken the genre to an all-new level and it's truly something special. A

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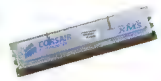

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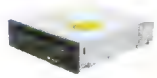

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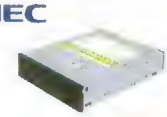

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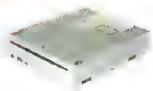

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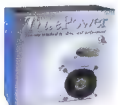

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Final Fantasy XI Online

Is your life ready for this game?

developer: squaresoft
publisher: square enix
available: october

words michael hobbs

Like building your own airplane, Final Fantasy XI requires an understanding spouse. To live with someone addicted to FFXI is to live alone. Dante springs to mind: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Final Fantasy XI is another in a fairly long line of MMORPGs that have sucked hundreds and hundreds of hours away from hapless players. What separates it from the rest for me is its execution. This is online role playing filtered through the visual masters at Square, and the results are nothing short of breathtaking. The world of the game is so huge, so beautifully detailed that it instantly sets a new standard for the genre. Online RPGs are not supposed to have characters that look this good, nor are they supposed to have the sort of atmospheric brilliance exhibited here. They will have to from here on out, however.

I've espoused on the outer beauty of this game at length before, but what of the play experience? Would it be enough for me to simply describe it as addictive? Probably not, but the truth of the matter is there is much to do in this game, so much intricacy to master, that it would be pointless for me to go into detail about any one aspect. As expected for the genre, there is copious running from here to there and a lot of combat, but the game avoids tedium by properly doling out rewards and incentives, so that no matter where or what you are doing, there are at least three or four short- and long-term goals being tackled. The game will not let you leave!

Like other online games, your experience can be ruined by other players. But unlike competitive online games, teamwork is everything when in combat with high level monsters. The difference in experience gained between a good and bad team is stunning, and there might be times when you waste literally hours getting a good team together only to have it all fall apart in a shambles of poor leadership and sloppy play. But there is an appeal there, of course, because it means that the game requires skill and knowledge to play well, making the successes all that much sweeter.

What I hope I've imparted here is that FFXI is a wonderfully deep, rewarding, and beautiful game. I am hopelessly addicted to the thing, and I am certain that most people that give it a fair shake will end up in a like state of mind. Just remember not to neglect your friends, your family, your school or your work. Good luck with that part. A

"Online RPGs are not supposed to have characters that look this good, nor are they supposed to have the sort of atmospheric brilliance exhibited here."

The U.S. release of FFXI includes the Rise of Zilart expansion pack which was offered separately in Japan, and it adds three new job classes (Ninja, Dragoon, and Samurai) as well as new areas, making the domestic FFXI a great value. Pricing for the game subscription $12.95 per month, with an additional one dollar charge per character.

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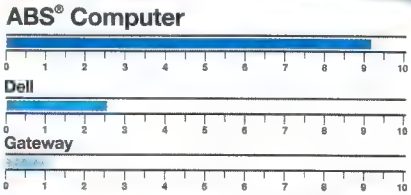

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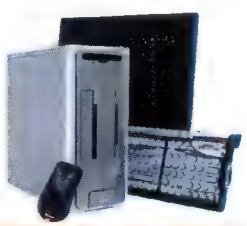

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Etherlords II

More fun than you can shake a diseased rat

developer: nival interactive
publisher: strategy first
available: october

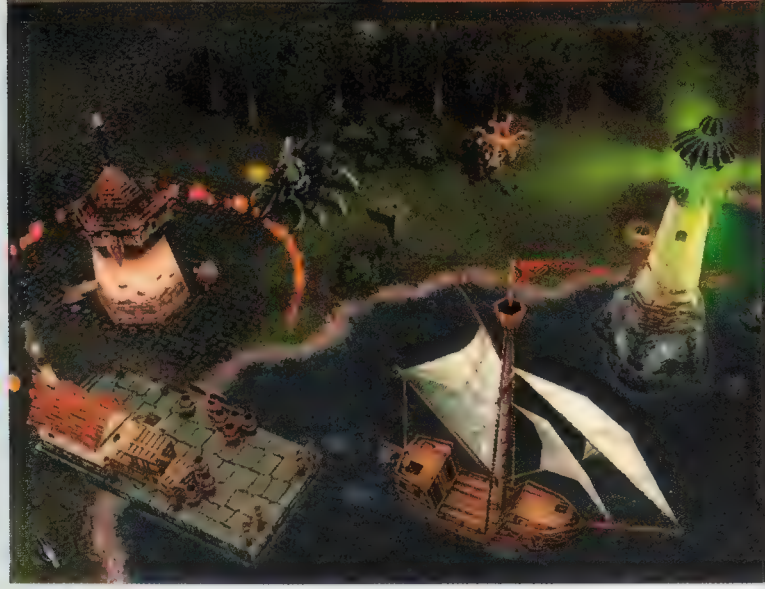
words christina alexander

With crisp graphics and addictive turn-based gameplay, Etherlords II is an unexpectedly strong adventure/RPG/strategy title. This second installment of the Etherlords series is slightly less strategy-oriented than the first; however, the addition of more adventure and RPG elements really rounds out the gameplay.

Unlike many of the newer PC releases, EL2 is just as much fun, if not more, to play in its single-player mode as in the multi-player mode. There are four single-player adventure campaigns to conquer, with each campaign representing a different Ether race, and upon completion of them, a fifth campaign becomes available. The races—Chaots, Kinets, Vitals and Synthets—differ not only in their looks but also in their magical attributes which integrally affects the strategy for each battle. In each fight, the hero has access to five randomly selected magical cards from their entire active deck of 16 cards. As the turns progress, more Ether can be channeled and more cards from the active deck become available for use. This random card selection aspect guarantees that every battle will be different even if the enemy creatures don't vary much in one area.

Building a strong deck of cards, knowing what each card will do and using it at the correct time during the battles is absolutely crucial to winning. However, with the formidable enemy AI, sometimes all that determines whether the hero achieves victory or oblivion is the simple luck of the draw. Even the most well thought-out strategies won't work unless the right cards show up. The trick is to stay flexible and to refine strategies that will work with different combinations of cards. Also, don't expect to cruise through each battle quickly, especially if your opponent (computer or human) is adept. Most altercations will last at least 10 minutes, with some soaring up to 30.

As the weather gets colder and you want to cuddle up to a nice warm and engaging adv/strat game, then Etherlords II more than fits the bill. A



Warrior Kings: Battles

Build it, and they will come

developer: black cactus games
publisher: strategy first
available: october

words christina alexander

Attention to detail, micromanagement and patience have always been a part of strategy games, but Warrior Kings: Battles may have taken it a bit too far. This sequel to the first Warrior Kings game features three single-player modes as well as the opportunity to jump on the net and challenge a combination of human and computer AI opponents. Campaign mode requires the player to enact a sort of manifest destiny and conquer all opponents across the land while Skirmish allows for a campaign against AI opponents on a single map. Valhalla plays the same as Skirmish except that the tediousness of building and maintaining a support economy has been removed.

Before you can take your fighting hordes to the field of battle, you must first create an economy to support your war efforts, and building this economy takes patience! You'll have to keep a close eye on your resources to make sure that you don't have more people than you can provide for. The preferred army size to really deal damage to neighboring rulers is daunting, and the longer-than-expected preparation time required to build such an army seems to suck most of the fun right out of the game. While prep-time is nothing new for RTS fans, the amount of time needed for WKB seems excessive, and the tutorials along with the early missions do a very poor job of training new players. Put this together with rather poor graphics and the frustrating tendency of your troops to not follow through with your orders completely and Warrior Kings: Battles is less of a way to enjoy oneself and more of a reason to pull one's hair out. C

Getting to scenes like this takes more than a little patience.

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Mario and Luigi: Superstar Saga

review

Another rousing success for the Mario Bros.

words chris hoffman

publisher: nintendo

developer: alpha dream

Enemies better watch out when the Mario Bros. team up for timed-button-press special moves.

Mario rarely ventures out of his regularly scheduled action games and wacky sports titles and into the realm of RPGs, but when he has, the results have been nothing short of excellent. This one is no different. Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga has managed to once again capture the magic of a Mario game and fuse it with the mechanics of an RPG, resulting in an adventure that defines fun as only Nintendo can.

A childlike sense of wonder invigorates the entire Mario & Luigi experience. The bold visuals, mechanics, story and characters are brought together with a seemingly effortless charm. Platforming features prominently into the exploration of this surreal world, where, as with Paper Mario and Super Mario RPG, turn-based battles are grounded in skill rather than navigating menus. Talented players can escape every fight unscathed by using timed button presses to avoid attacks and inflict extra damage, all while using trademark Mario moves like hammer slams and—what else?—jumping on the bad guys' head. There are coin blocks to bash, mushrooms to munch, pipes to crawl through, Bowser to stomp…in essence, everything that makes Mario Mario.

"The bold visuals, mechanics, story and characters are brought together with a seemingly effortless charm."

Adding to the fun is the independent control given to the two heroes. Mario and Luigi's actions are controlled simply but separately, each with a different button, in a manner that requires a completely fresh approach from the player. Simultaneous defense and synchronized jumping is mildly brain bending, but it's quite worth getting used to. Furthermore, team-up attacks and a continually growing repertoire of special moves are integrated so well into this framework that it feels absolutely natural after a short time.

In other respects, Superstar Saga also shines. Nintendo's dry humor is in top form—long-time Nintendo players can't help but knowingly grin at remarks about Luigi's status as second banana—and cameo appearances are much appreciated, while a good stock of minigames keep things interesting.

Mario virtually never disappoints, and Mario & Luigi certainly continues that legacy. It's a fun, clever, innovative quest for RPG fans of all ages. **A-**

Super Mario Advance 4: Super Mario Bros. 3

review

Still one of the very best

words chris hoffman

publisher: nintendo

developer: nintendo

While Super Mario World holds a place in my heart as my favorite Mario game, Super Mario Bros. 3, here seen under the guise of Super Mario Advance 4, is without a doubt one of the finest platformers ever. As fans of the NES and SNES versions know, SMB3 is a thing of beauty, an absolutely ingenious platformer with constantly innovative level design and unique power-up outfits augmenting Mario's oh-so-classic block-busting and enemy-stomping. To experience Mario 3 wholly is to do more than just play a game; it's to reach a new mindset, a oneness with the mechanics and action that only the best games can do. Graphics are taken straight from the All-Stars version of the game—meaning they look fantastic—and the audio is great, even enhanced with voice clips (albeit ones from previous Mario Advance games). The challenge is also perfect, the quick-save option makes the game more playable without being cheap, and the e-Card features are icing on the cake. I can't think of any reason to not recommend this amazing game. **A**

SMB3 introduced various costumes to the Mario universe, making the gameplay even deeper.

Fire Emblem

review

Further proof that the GBA is the machine for strategy games

words chris hoffman

publisher: nintendo

developer: intelligent systems

Long have North American gamers waited; now it's finally here. What's all the fuss about the elusive Fire Emblem? Nothing short of good, clean, strategic fun.

Fire Emblem starts out strong, with a foundation of traditional grid-based gameplay familiar to anyone who's ever touched the genre. Firmly placed upon this are a wealth of varied elements—weapon priorities, character classes with unique skills, terrain effects, weather conditions—all of which add to the strategy, building up a surprising amount of depth. The controls stay simple, the action pure; it never reaches the intricate levels of a game like Final Fantasy Tactics, but for me, this only served to make the game more accessible and enjoyable.

A maturely themed storyline and rousing musical score propel the action to magnificent heights, and the visuals, though unimpressive in battle, feature cutscenes and portraits that elicit a warm, fuzzy feeling reminiscent of 16-bit—only better. Though a few facets of Fire Emblem did get on my nerves—permanently losing characters that fall in battle, for example—they didn't detract from the experience so much that I ever wanted to stop.

Joining the likes of Advance Wars and FFT, Fire Emblem is yet another quality title that cements the GBA as the strategy fan's system of choice. **B+**

The art and character designs of Fire Emblem are bursting with old-school appeal.

Hardware: N-Gage

In the market for a portable game machine that does more than just play games on an ill-considered screen via poor button placement? This is your expensive ticket.

manufacturer: nokia | available: october | price: $299

words brady fiechter

Nokia's N-Gage plays MP3s, serves as a cell phone, receives FM radio and allows casual web surfing. It's a basic PDA device, communicates with your PC, stores general files, expands into all sorts of functionality through downloads—you can even make it into a universal remote. Figuring out how to turn it on is one thing; siphoning through the cumbersome menus to access all this potential is another. The unit is flimsy, inelegant and full of annoying design flaws, not doing one single thing really well and more than enough things just good enough. Inappropriately, it's being billed primarily as a game machine: hardcore gamers will balk; casual players will certainly find the $300 price tag off-putting. I found myself toying around with all the other features far more than wanting to struggle with the awkward button layout and come to grips with playing ports displayed on a screen with a vertically dominated aspect ratio.

Among its other flaws, the N-Gage requires that you remove the back cover and then remove the battery before you can change games. This is ridiculous design. Not only is it likely to make the back cover loose after a few months, it's a real hassle. Any game system that is a hassle to use, regardless of its ancillary capabilities, is doomed to fail.

Pandemonium!

publisher: eidos

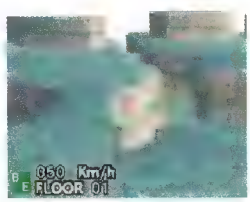
words brady fiechter | developer: ideaworks 3D

I liked Pandemonium! seven years ago on the PSOne, but it seems like an odd choice to help carry the launch of already suspect hardware. The game drops you in the fantastical world of Lyr, which is presented in a traditional 2D-3D setup that locks the platforming into rigid left/right travel. The game plays fast and looks decent squashed down for the N-Gage, controlling well enough within the basic movements of the characters Nikki and Fargus. This bright medieval world-setting is designed nicely around the energetic, high-flying attack-and-jump mechanics, holding up the best of all the early games on the whacked screen. **C+**

Super Monkey Ball

system: nokia n-gage | publisher: sega mobile

words brady fiechter | developer: amusement vision



After struggling with the ill-conceived control setup of Tomb Raider, I was looking forward to simpler fun with Super Monkey Ball. After popping the back panel of the N-Gage, removing the batteries—yes, the games fit underneath the batteries—and waiting for it all to load back up, I finally found a game I could somewhat get into. Super Monkey Ball doesn't dazzle with visual pop or offer anything at all in the way of extras, but the fun, simple gameplay of rolling the monkey across obstacle-laden, moving boards left me casually entertained; this is definitely a game geared for those few-minute distractions when you're bored on the go. **B-**

Tomb Raider

publisher: eidos

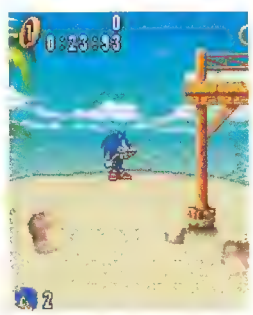
words brady fiechter | developer: ideaworks 3D | available: october

One of my favorite games ever is a welcome sight for the launch, but when you remove the nostalgia, once again the question is asked: can't they find something fresher and newer to attract an audience to this fledgling system? It's cool seeing this aged but workable 3D engine on a portable system, and the engaging, sprawling gameplay and cavernous setting has been left faithfully intact. The N-Gage's funky aspect ratio actually hurts this game a lot, though, and when you factor in the terrible control—why the annoying automatic run?—it's just not fun having to guide the leaden Lara through her clumsy paces. Too involved to work on the N-Gage. **C**

Sonic N

publisher: sega mobile

words brady fiechter | developer: sonic team



If Nokia wants to reel in the serious gamer, Sonic N is an acceptable start, but you can't look past the fact that the game has a much better home on Game Boy Advance, which is all every hardcore portable player really needs and probably already has. And if the N-Gage is to appeal to a broader, uninitiated audience, is Sonic the right choice? Implications aside, the game is everything you'd think it should be on a portable unit. It may be straightforward play, but all the trademark speed, keen design and classic character that made Sonic such a success works just fine today, prime for handheld. I'm always down for another round with Sega's indomitable hedgehog. **B-**

Shining Soul II

review

Improving on the original, but not by much

words chris hoffman

publisher: atlus

developer: sega

Shining Soul II is a sequel in the truest sense, offering up more of the same action-RPG gameplay that was found in the first. Players are treated to new character classes (Ninja, Dark Wizard, Priestess, Sorceress and Brawler), more stats to manage and, of course, a new story and new levels to overcome. The fundamentals, however, are the same, which in a way is too bad. While the first game was enjoyable with its charming visuals and linearly straightforward dungeon-crawl action, it could have used a number of improvements, such as more complex levels, more towns and...er...the ability to pause the game. None of that was included here. The gameplay that's presented is fun, especially with the variety of weapons and upgradeable skills, and the ability to play with four players is much appreciated, but I really wish they'd added more depth and diversity to the experience. If you liked the first one, though, you'll be pleased with this seque C+

River City Ransom EX

preview

words chris hoffman

publisher: atlus

developer: million

River City has gone to hell—the place is overrun with gangs, and the worst punk of the bunch, Slick, is even kidnapping people's girlfriends. What's a guy to do but hit the streets and start kicking some major butt? This update of the NES classic features the same gameplay as the original, as well as the RPG elements that made that game famous: crazy comments from gang members as you rough them up, and tons of crazy crap to buy—from waffles to gum to sneakers—to pump up your stats. The super-deformed sprites don't seem to be pushing the GBA, but they're notably more detailed than the original, and the wildly catchy classic tunes are back. Fans of the NES game should be thrilled.

Dragon Ball Z: Taiketsu

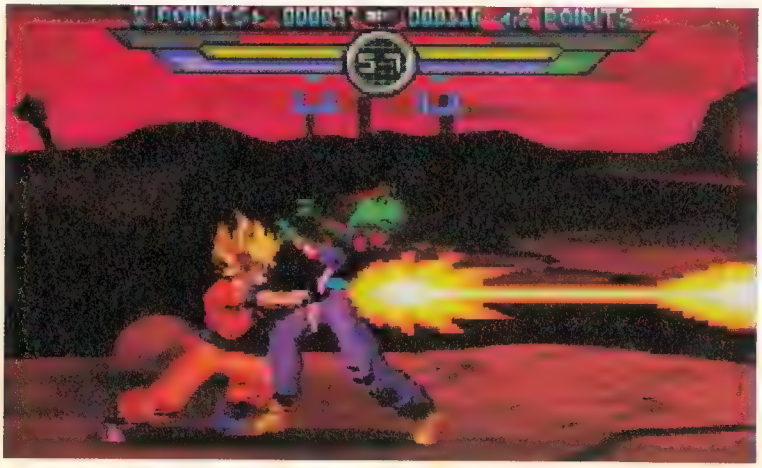
review

words chris hoffman

publisher: atari

developer: webfoot tech.

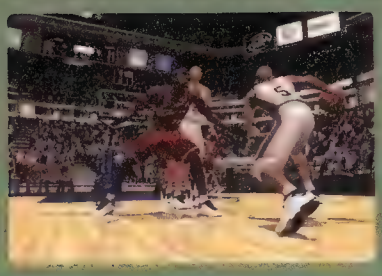
Dragon Ball Z: Taiketsu, to be blunt, is not a good game. Virtually every aspect of this sorry excuse for a fighting game fails painfully. The problems start with unresponsive controls and poor animation. Regular attacks are stiff and awkward, while executing the inadequate number of special moves seems based on luck; I actually had special moves occurring by accident more than intentionally. Having to charge up a power meter to execute even basic special moves is a very poorly conceived mechanic, especially for a game based on the action-packed DBZ universe, and none of the show's personality comes through. Additionally, the AI is broken; I never lost a single match, even on hard mode. For a decent DBZ game on your GBA, get Legacy of Goku II instead. F



sports

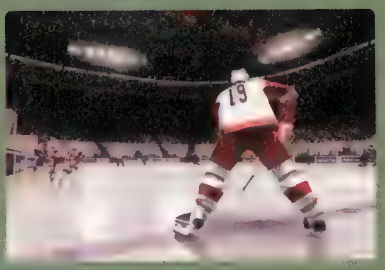
NBA Inside Drive 2004

"Where Inside Drive draws the foul are in the visuals."



NHL Rivals

"Probably the coolest feature is NHL role-playing."



NCAA March Madness 2004

"To truly enjoy March Madness 2004 is to play it."

NCAA Final Four 2004

"...Final Four 2004 can't even get off the bench."

Midway's NBA Ballers Event

PlayStation 2 Triple Double Event

To celebrate PlayStation 2's third anniversary, 989 Sports and Sony Computer Entertainment America hosted a "Triple Double" celebrity gaming tournament with their latest basketball title, NBA Shootout 2004. The all-star roster had 16 celebrities and athletes including Mark Wahlberg, Mira Sorvino, Shannon Elizabeth, Don Cheadle, Orlando Bloom, LA Clipper Elton Brand and Oakland Raiders' Jerry Porter.

At the start of the tournament, it was anyone's ballgame, but the crowd favorite was Mira Sorvino. Her first match was against Mark Wahlberg—who she quickly defeated as she went on to the next round. Other top players included Shannon Elizabeth (who is a big gamer, by the way) and Don Cheadle. "I'm not much of a gamer," said Orlando Bloom. "I'm just here to support a good cause." In the end, it was two athletes, not actors, who made it to the finals: fellow LA Clippers Corey Maggette and Elton Brand. After a close match, won in the last seconds, Elton Brand was defeated and Corey Maggette took the title for PlayStation 2 Triple Double Champion.

After the tournament, guest and celebs moseyed outside where a Hollywood studio was turned into a football locker room—complete with concessions stands and a sports book. This event also featured performances by Ludacris and N.E.R.D. with DJ Grandmaster Flash spinning the wheels of steel afterwards. **play**

Backyard Wrestling: Don't Try This At Home

system: playstation 2, xbox
developer: paradox
publisher: eidos
available: october

words chris hoffman

"...just wait for something better to come along."

Few wrestling games have ever made me want to tap out as much as Backyard Wrestling did. There are many reasons to be appalled by this game, but it all starts with a poorly designed game engine that's spazzy to the point of near unplayablity. There's no depth, little strategy, and not much fun. No offense to the real-life wrestlers, but the characters here are perhaps the most unappealing cast ever assembled, with embarrassing voice clips and limited move sets. The graphics themselves are OK and the characters animate well, but there's tons of clipping and poor collision detection; I lost count of how many times my attacks passed right through my opponent. Cheap AI is made even worse by the main game mode's use of survival-style bouts; your life doesn't completely refill between matches. The idea of interactive environments has promise, but they're hard to utilize properly, relying more on luck than anything else. The problems continue with a pointless custom character editor (you can only select from pre-designed characters), long loading times (in the PS2 version), a lack of modes (even the unlockable stuff is just singles bouts) and misguided attempts at humor. If you really want a white-trash wrestling game with no frills and no features...just wait for something better to come along. **D-**

WWE SmackDown!
Here Comes The Pain

A champion, but still not at full potential

system: playstation 2
developer: yuke's
publisher: thq
available: october

words chris hoffman

In many respects, WWE SmackDown: Here Comes The Pain is the pinnacle of wrestling video games. More than just an intricate representation of the world of sports entertainment, HCTP showcases moments of gaming brilliance and amazing feats of artistry, further elevating the series from "wrestling game" to "serious sports sim." Which makes the knowledge that it could have been even better that much harder to bear, as every minor flaw glares angrily on an otherwise beautiful sheen.

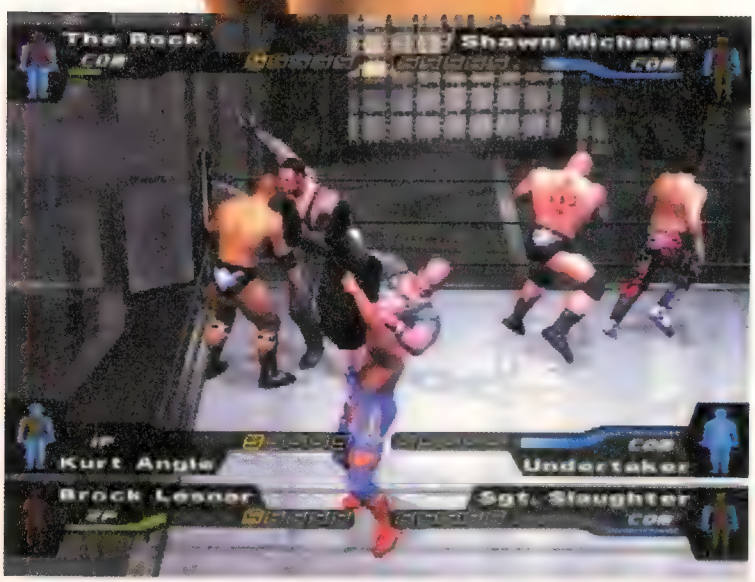
Building upon past success, HCTP offers some of the deepest wrestling gameplay ever, starting with the revamped grapple and reversal systems. The engine is richer and more flexible than before, now tweaked with enhancements both big and small. The season mode is also incredibly polished, offering entertaining stories and more variety, yet it's streamlined where necessary, while the custom character mode is the best in all of video gaming. Visually, the game is an absolute knockout; I stand in awe of the visual spectacle that Yuke's has produced.

SmackDown once again offers an impressive wealth of modes. Most of the previous year's modes have returned—seeing such high-integrity models all moving at once in a six-man tag match is astounding—along with the excellent new Elimination Chamber and more. The new Bra & Panties match isn't just about gratuity—it also has innovative new mechanics, amazing cloth physics and substantial technical prowess that make it into a worthwhile gameplay component. Next year I'd like to see them revamp the Royal Rumble, which is still too luck-based for me; the Rumbles in WrestleMania XIX and Raw 2 are much better.

With so much effort spent on the rest of the game, one would think that the audio would have also received the same first-class treatment, but this unfortunately isn't the case. True, the crowd reactions are great and most of the licensed tunes are there, but the game's presentation suffers from a lack of voiceovers—both color commentary and ring entrance announcements are absent. Additionally, none of the legend wrestlers received entrance music; how can you have The Million Dollar Man without "Money, Money, Money" blaring as he heads to the ring? For that matter, it would have been worth THQ's while to invest in licensing Rob Van Dam's actual music.

The other sore spot lies in the play balance. In an attempt to make the characters more in line with their TV personas, the WWE wrestlers have been given wildly disparate abilities, resulting in some characters completely overpowering others. I don't want extra difficulty just because I want to play the game as Matt Hardy, nor do I want the game to be easier if Brock Lesnar is my competitor of choice.

Despite these fumbles, the good far, far outweighs the bad. In terms of graphics and gameplay, HCTP could very well be as good as it can get in this genre. If they fix the play balance and are able to add that last bit of audio polish (and adjust that Steph model… she was *hot* in the preview build), the next iteration could be perfection. **A-**



"I stand in awe of the visual spectacle that Yuke's has produced."

The season mode in HCTP is, without a doubt, the best ever featured in a wrestling game.

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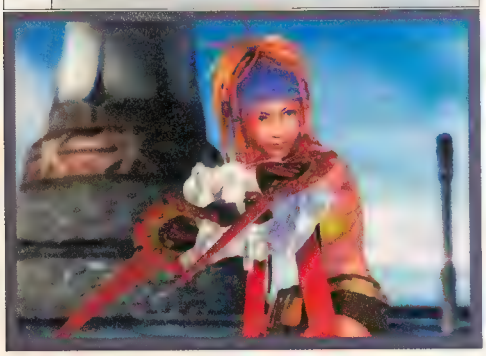
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square enix / ps2*
02	**NBA Live 2004** *ea / ps2*
03	**SOCOM II** *sony / ps2*
04	**True Crime: Streets of L.A.** *activision / ps2*
05	**Manhunt** *rockstar / ps2*
06	**Lord of the Rings: Return of the King** *ea / ps2*
07	**Medal of Honor: Rising Sun** *ea / ps2*
08	**Star Wars: Rebel Strike** *lucasarts / gc*
09	**SSX3** *ea / ps2*
10	**GTA Double Pack** *rockstar / xbox*



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Sept. Game Sales

01	**Madden NFL 2004** *ea / ps2*
02	**Final Fantasy Tactics** *nintendo / gba*
03	**Tiger Woods PGA 2004** *ea / ps2*
04	**Soul Calibur II** *namco / ps2*
05	**Soul Calibur II** *namco / gc*
06	**GTA: Vice City** *rockstar / ps2*
07	**Soul Calibur II** *namco / xbox*
08	**ESPN NFL Football** *sega / xbox*
09	**Madden NFL 2004** *ea / xbox*
10	**SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals** *sony / ps2*

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NBA Live 2004
ea / gc, ps2, xbox, pc

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Need for Speed Underground
ea / ps2, gc, xbox, pc

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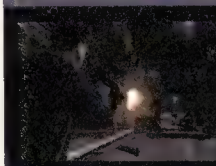

Max Payne 2 *rockstar / xb, pc*

Play as Max, back on the NYPD, and the deadly vixen, Mona Sax, who's stolen his heart and probably his last bullets...

staff and reader selections

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Readers' Most Wanted

01	**Halo 2** *microsoft / xbox*
02	**Final Fantasy XI Online** *sony / ps2*
03	**Ninja Gaiden** *tecmo / xbox*
04	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** *konami / ps2*
05	**Kingdom Hearts II** *square enix / ps2*

Dave Halverson *editor in chief*

01	**Armed and Dangerous** *lucasarts / xbox*
02	**Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time** *ubisoft / xbox*
03	**Castlevania: Lament of Innocence** *konami / ps2*
04	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
05	**Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy** *thq / gc*

Brady Fiechter *executive editor*

01	**Lord of the Rings: Return of the King** *ea / ps2*
02	**Medal of Honor: Rising Sun** *ea / xbox*
03	**Final Fantasy X-2** *square / ps2*
04	**XIII** *ubisoft / xbox*
05	**Need for Speed Underground** *ea / ps2*

Chris Hoffman *some editor*

01	**WWE SmackDown! HCTP** *thq / ps2*
02	**Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga** *nintendo / gba*
03	**Super Mario Advance 4: SMB3** *nintendo / gba*
04	**PC Genjin** *hudson / ps2 (import)*
05	**King of Fighters 2000 & 2001** *snk / ps2*

Michael Hobbs *art director*

01	**Final Fantasy XI Online** *square enix / pc*
02	**Castlevania: Lament of Innocence** *konami / ps2*
03	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
04	**Mario Party 5** *nintendo / gc*
05	**Super Mario Advance 4: SMB3** *nintendo / gba*

Nelson Lui *associate art director*

01	**Final Fantasy XI Online** *square enix / pc*
02	**WWE SmackDown! HCTP** *thq / ps2*
03	**Mario Kart: Double Dash!!** *nintendo / gc*
04	**Mario Party 5** *nintendo / gc*
05	**Mizuiro** *nec interchannel / pc*

play anime

Last Exile

Well, Studio Gonzo has done it again. Done what, you ask? They've only provided anime fans with some of the most spectacular animation, most whimsical machinery designs and most flawless blending of 2D and 3D art to be seen anywhere. Gonzo has devoted so much time and attention to detail that even a delicately rising pillar of smoke captivates the eye and makes you shake your head in disbelief. How do they make it look so good?

The story of Last Exile is told in an alternate world where the races of men strive for dominance of the skies. Melding the heavy high drama and chivalry of the colonial war era with the post-industrial flight enthusiasm of the first two World Wars, *Last Exile* is something of a strange but intriguing bird.

Claus and Lavie, the protagonists, are two very young and precocious pilots who make their way in the world as van ship sky porters. No job is too difficult, and no destination is too dangerous! After accepting a task from a noblewoman to deliver a message to her husband, a general in the current war, Claus and Lavie find themselves caught in a desperate battle between two enemy airship fleets. It is as if even a [illegible] of van ship pilots will be able to avoid being sucked into the fighting.

"...even a delicately rising pillar of smoke captivates the eye and makes you shake your head in disbelief."

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Orguss 02

words dave halverson

If we were to excavate weapons of mass destruction, capable of devastation far beyond the level current technology allows, what would we do...what would any country do? Leave them be? Display them in a museum? Turn them into flowerpots? Or maybe, oh, I don't know, wage a little war? Bingo!

Orguss 02 presents just such a scenario, although the heart of the story lays in the weapons themselves, their purveyor's origins and the greed of men. Two-hundred years after the Space-Time Continuum collapses, humankind discovers ruined robots they label Decimators, mysterious robotic weapons with spiritual implications, which eventually bring about a war that divides the world, or at least this particular continent, into two superpowers: Rivilia and Zafrin. From there, *Orguss 02* unfolds like a modern-day war epic chronicling the plight of a young man, Lean, who, through a heart-wrenching turn of events, is thrust into the throes of political unrest among his government, the throngs of war, forbidden love, and one of the most surprising and gripping plot twists in mecha-based anime history. This may also be where the creators of the film *AI* got their "seekers," although these ones actually trigger events, and work sans wading pool. This is a big, rich story, with a protagonist at odds with his identity, an unlikely hero (the incorrigible Lt. Manning, the story's anchor), dueling royal houses, a tragic love triangle and a compelling sci-fi edge that drives the story but doesn't overpower it. One thing this is not is your typical mecha or science fiction OVA. **B+**

studio manga entertainment
rating 13 & up
running time 160 minutes
available now

Card Captor Sakura The Movie 2
The Sealed Card

words christina alexander

Yeah, it's cute, but it's CLAMP! The *Card Captor Sakura* series moves forward with the second movie, and things have never been more dire for little Sakura. Sakura notices that more and more of her Clow cards are turning up missing, and when she attempts to use her cards to stop the thief, even more precious cards are torn from her grasp. All signs are pointing to a powerful and menacing Sealed Card. The Sealed Card is not only stealing Sakura's Clow cards, but it's also kidnapping people, along with entire chunks of the city, and her Clow-based magic seems powerless to stop it.

First off, anytime you mix Clamp design with Madhouse animation, then you're almost guaranteed to get visual gold. No matter what you may think about shoujo anime, CCS is just plain gorgeous to look at. While the story tends to grow dark as events progress, the scenes with cute Keroberos are enough to keep things from growing too dim. Watching Kero-chan yell at the screen as he practices his video game play technique should get a chuckle or two, even if you're prejudiced against small, fuzzy, yellow animals. If you've been following the series, then this second movie should be a definite buy and a treasured addition to your collection, but if you are just getting into this world, then it's best to head back and see the entire series first. This is hardly the best place to dive into the CCS universe. **B**

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Final Fantasy Unlimited

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studio adv films
rating 12 & up
running time 100 minutes
available now

words dave halverson

I know...it's exciting: another *Final Fantasy* anime, and this time at least vaguely connected to the video game universe. Well, don't get your hopes up too high (as I did); this one registers somewhere within the okay-to-good range, and...it's for kids…like Trix. When I think Final Fantasy, I envision majestic characters, heart-wrenching drama and exquisite art, none of which make the scene in *FF Unlimited*. Instead, we get a cute romp about a place called Wonderland (as in *Alice in Wonderland*, which they've used for the catalyst) and two children looking for their lost parents.

It all begins when The Pillar of Darkness shows up and spews a pair of CG-rendered deities into the human world. They clash, there's an explosion, both die and the pillar remains. Apparently two of the onlookers, husband and wife scientists, pregnant with twins, spend the next few years researching the mysterious spire, eventually finding a way to breach its inner sanctum (Wonderland), where they visit and return to write a book about the journey, which becomes a best seller. It's safe to say their kids are a bit sideways.

As the series begins, 12 years after the initial event, their two offspring—Ai, a bratty little girl, and her brother, Yu, a whiny little boy with all of the personality of a potato—await a mysterious transport which, according to the parents' book, will pick them up at precisely 13 minutes past 12 and whisk them off to Wonderland, where their parents have again ventured, but not returned. Enter Galaxy Express 999, Square-style (a CG rendered ornate rocket train that inside resembles a normal subway), right on time. Aboard the train they reluctantly befriend the only other person aboard, a mysterious and beautiful young woman named Lisa. The train drops them off quite literally on the stairway to heaven, which they proceed to ascend into Wonderland, and finally the fantasy begins…or not.

Much to my chagrin, Wonderland is barren and oddly enough macrobiotic, ruled by mushroom monsters and other organic life forms of the edible kind. Almost instantly, the kids come under attack when an odd rendered mushroom ship drops a crystalline bomb that sprouts a big, digitally animated mushroom boss that looks like something I drew in second grade that my mom put up on the refrigerator. Enter Kaze, the Magun Man (dark, mysterious, nicely tattooed, all-powerful and too cool), the male lead with a right arm that resembles a triple-barrel gun much like the snout of the Panzer Dragoon-like dragon that appeared out of the Pillar of Darkness. The first battle ensues. It takes this guy so long to bark out the friggin' intro for each bullet as he loads the three chambers that by the time he fired the damn thing I was comatose. Then—boom!—the mushroom explodes and the old FF battle outro plays. Yippee.

Next we meet the Earl of Wonderland, a chubby little tyrant god, and his minions, one very Poison Ivy-looking vegetable hotty, Herba, Master Fungus, a mushroom man that smokes a hash pipe, Oscha, who looks like an extra from Princess Mononoke, and Pist, which you'd be too if you were this kid's pet. Chubby Boy wants the kids erased, of course, and so off go the minions one by one to get the job done. Things do pick up when the kids meet Mrs. Chocbaba (yes, there's a Chocobo lady) and befriend a cute little Chocobo, Chobi, which Yu can channel through one of its feathers, and Makenshi, the third character of FFU worth getting excited about (the first two being Magun and Lisa). Sadly, things snap back to Sesame Street as the band enter the next world, "Fruit": a fruit-based place you can actually eat, where flowers attack...Magun loads his gun, lather, rinse and repeat. This can't be *Final Fantasy Unlimited*. But it is, at least for now. I have it on good authority that it gets better. On the plus side so far, there's some cool albeit misplaced CG, great character design and lovely trademark music, but otherwise *FFU* needs to wake up and smell the over-12 demographic. Given it's Gonzo with ADV on the western front, I say that goes without saying. **C+**

"...they proceed to
ascend into Wonderland,
and finally the fantasy
begins...or not."

Mao-chan

words christina alexander

Are you ready to protect Japan in high spirits? Just because you may have to fight off all manner of invaders from space with heavy artillery doesn't mean it shouldn't be done with a smile!

Japan is under attack. Again. But not from large, rubber, fire-breathing lizards or multi-tentacled demon lords bent on releasing hell on earth. The latest terrors to rock Japan are the really, really cute aliens from outer space! Oh, go ahead! Laugh it up! But you haven't known true horror until you have come face to face with the 50-foot-tall parachuting tabby cat of doom! But, never fear! Mao-chan is here! Mao is cute, she's good-natured, and very determined to protect her home country. Oh, and did I mention that she's eight? Together with her two close friends and allies and their high-tech alien-stomping war gear (animated courtesy of Production I.G), that cute, fuzzy alien bunny has wiggled its soft pink nose for the last time.

Clearly making fun of the anime archetype of sending pre-pubescent children off to save the world, *Mao-chan* has some of the wittiest satirical humor seen to date. The sheer absurdity of sending a second grader and her two friends off to defend the country is tempered by the fact that the alien animals don't actually do anything. Which is good, because the girls don't have live ammo anyway.

Including amusing stereotypes like the "Magical Girl" transformation and a Captain Gloval look-alike, Mao-chan is perfect for a serious gut laugh or two. After all, there's something inherently funny about an 8-year-old in control of a state-of-the-art fighter jet with VTOL capability. **A**

studio geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up
running time 89 minutes
available now

Licensed by Royalty

words christina alexander

It's quirky, it's funny, and it's got one of the best opening tunes since *Cowboy Bebop*. It's *Licensed By Royalty*. One's a dark-haired master of disguise and all around trouble-maker. The other is a suave, sophisticated, smooth-talking blonde. Together they're L/R. Which one is L and which one is R? Take your pick.

Jack and Row are private-sector super spies armed with an array of weapons and licensed by the royal family. It's their job to recover important royal artifacts as well as to generally make sure that the royal family keeps egg off its face.

Borrowing much style and presence from the James Bond spy flicks, L/R contains plenty of action and intrigue as well as enough off-beat humor to keep the storytelling light. The episodic stories are compact and well-told, easily getting from problem to solution within the standard 30 minutes. That's something that not a lot of anime titles can claim to do very well. The best part of this glowing report card is the soundtrack. The music both defies categorization and is supremely unexpected, but is exceedingly well done. Does Pioneer have yet another hit on its hands? Yeah, you might say that. **B**

studio geneon entertainment
rating 13 & up
running time 100 minutes
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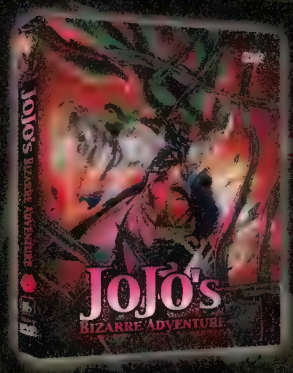

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Steam Detectives

words dave halverson

Few settings can rival the machine age, with its gauges, valves, gear-works, old-world flavor and, in *Steam Detectives*' case, bulbous steam-gear mecha called Megamaton. Steam City is fueled by coal and steam, a densely fogged municipal sprawl reminiscent of turn-of-the-century England retrofitted with wonderfully elaborate set dressing (courtesy of Kia Asamiya) and a melting pot of resident super villains whose ancestors could have easily migrated to Gotham City. But Steam City doesn't have a Batman; instead, protection comes by way of the local PD, and, moreover, the Steam Detectives, headed up by kid Columbo über-detective extraordinaire Narutaki, along with his assistant, the petite Ling-Ling, the butler from the Dreamcast game Evolution and a resident lackey whose name escapes me (guess that's why he's a lackey). Narutaki's second-greatest strength (beyond his super-sleuth capabilities) is Goriki, an invincible Megamaton created by Ling-Ling's late father, which the team maneuver through a vast network of underground tunnels, able to burst onto most any crime scene within seconds—and there are plenty to hone in on.

The technology of the time certainly provides fodder for a laundry list of villains, but beyond that, we're treated to some truly unique freakazoids courtesy of a sitcom-like pace that follows a main theme dotted generously with clever diversions such as, but not limited to, the Machine Baron—easily the most diabolically pathetic villain ever—and Night Phantom, the resident Batman/Tick-type caped crusader who is bent on destroying Narutaki and everything he holds dear for some inexplicable past incident. Beyond volume one, this storyline will surely provide plenty of steam-powered fireworks. Speaking of steam power, anyone who can explain to me the use of tracking devices and wireless remote controls circa the machine age, please, shine the light over here, would you?

studio adv films
rating 15 & up
running time 100 minutes
available now

Anime Test Drive: enter to win!

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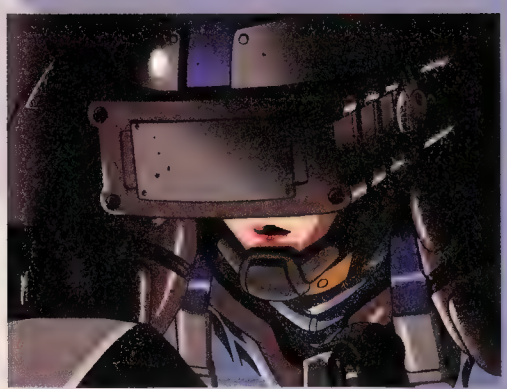

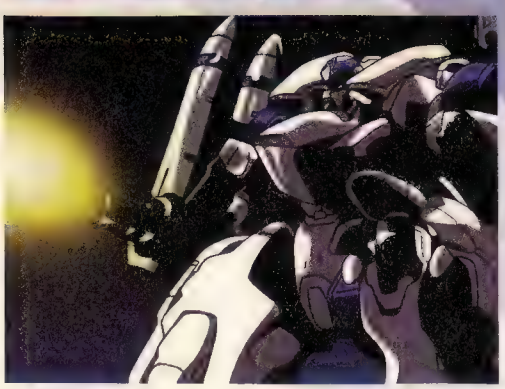

"Tastier slices of classic anime are hard to come by; you have to dig deep to find mid-'90s content...this rich."

New Dominion Tank Police
Complete Collection

words dave halverson

I've been waiting anxiously for Shirow Masamune's *New Dominion Tank Police* to make its way to DVD just for the sake of having it to preserve next to the likes of *Venus Wars* and my other old-school favorites. NDTP is pure over-the-cop drama...with tanks...Shirow tanks! Mechanical designs just don't get much better.

If you thought OCP had its hands full in Old Detroit, you ain't seen nothin' yet. Newport is a sea of slime with a murder every 30 seconds and a terrorist attack every 25 minutes. Luckily for the citizens (but not the real estate), the Tank Police have Leona, a feisty, foxy super cop, and Bonapart, her tiny little tank that acts titanic. Together, along with the rest of the crazed special tactical division (which amounts to a pack of loons with tanks), they attack crime the only way they know how: full speed ahead. As a result, they're not too popular with the mayor, their captain, or especially the crooked conglomerate that keeps the city up to its ears in heavy-metal weaponry, and when that backfires, the next fattest cash cow: virtual narcotics. And if that's not enough to fill your pipe, the Puna Twins will certainly put it over the top—two feline fatales that make bad look so very good. Urban pacification just doesn't get any better. **B+**

studio manga entertainment
rating 15 & up
running time 180 minutes
available now

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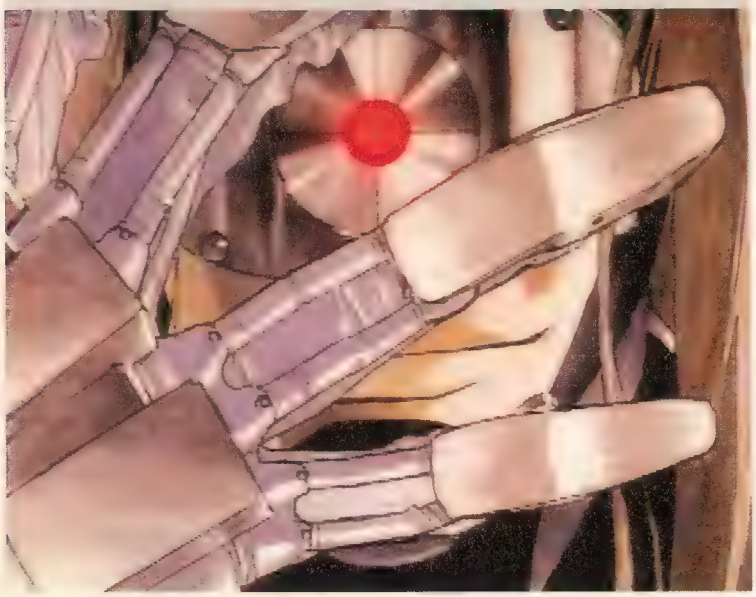
Virus Buster Serge

studio manga entertainment / **rating** 16 and up
running time 94 minutes / **volume** 3

words dave halverson

Behind all the bouncing naughty bits and Obari-tastic action, there's ample meat on these bones to close the show in style. By this time the characters have developed as much as the virus has spread, which, well, it's knocking on STAND's firewall, and there's more to killing this infection than a Microsoft patch. So sit back and watch the flesh fly (and bounce) as STAND make their last stand. **B-**

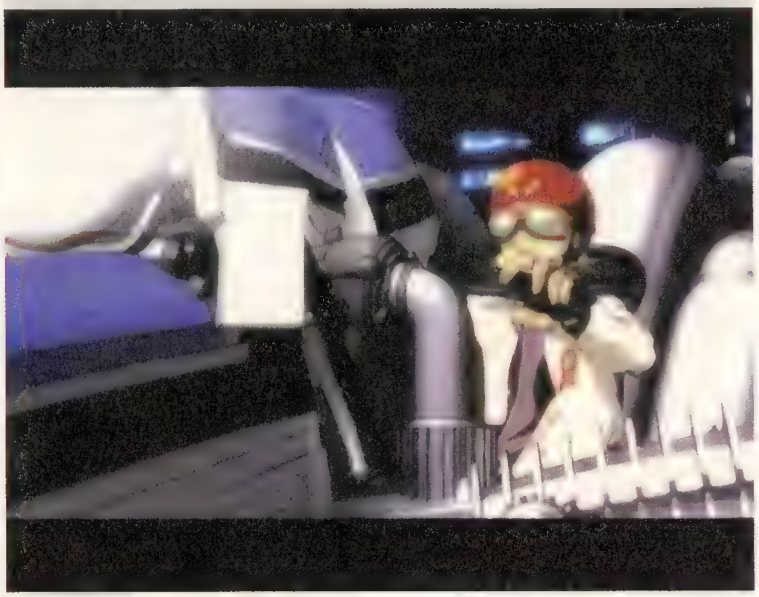


Heat Guy J: Vampire's Ambition

studio geneon entertainment / **rating** 13 and up
running time 100 minutes / **volume** 2

words dave halverson

Heat Guy J began burning hot and continues to sizzle thanks to a beautiful marriage of digi-mation and CG, and a utopian society that's anything but. Delving ever deeper, the ruling crime lord Vampire gets his due this time out; we get to see a child android contort onto a twisted death dealer and even get a lesson on the commodities market! Check out the requisite bullets and do not miss a frame. **A**

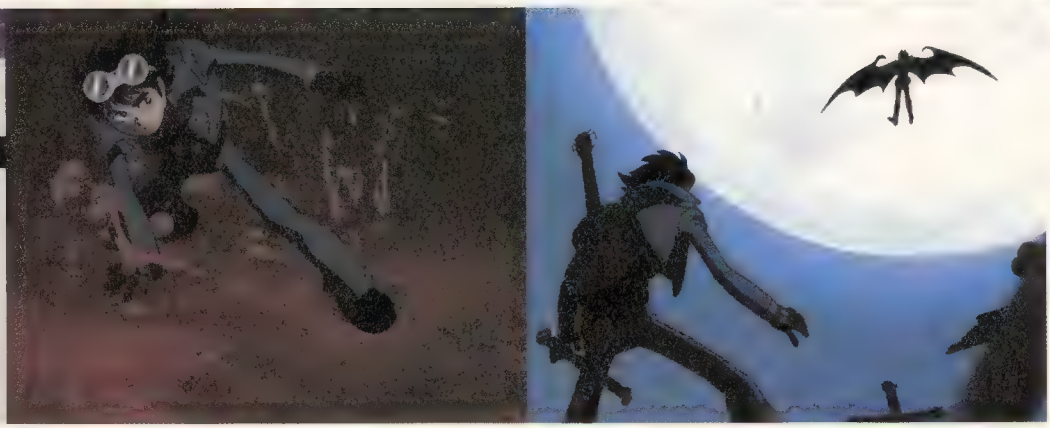


Android Kikaider

studio bandai entertainment / **rating** 13 and up
running time 75 minutes / **volume** 2

words dave halverson

It isn't often a second volume tops the first, but Android Kikaider: Conflicting Hearts excels in ways I never imagined. What seemed like fairly straightforward cyber-Pinocchio-meets-Frankenstein fare has woven itself into a web of family ties and deception far greater than the implications surrounding Kohmyoji's bastard android. Professor Gil and The Dark blacken an already bittersweet tale surrounded by some of the most compelling series animation and character designs this year. **A**



s-Cry-ed

studio bandai entertainment / **rating** 13 and up
running time 100 minutes / **volume** 4

words dave halverson

HOLD's pilgrimage of oppression continues to spread throughout the Lost Ground, ultimately causing Kazuma do go ballistic, opening up a portal to the origins of Alters (the immense powers select few wield in this engaging sci-fi epic). The Lost Ground and Zigmari's future hang in a delicate balance as we head into Volume 4. **B**

THE BATTLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL IS ABOUT TO REACH EPIC PROPORTIONS!

SAINT SEIYA

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Talking with Keymaker

As a primer for *Matrix: Revolutions'* November 5 opening, revisiting *Reloaded* on DVD raised my attention again to what was one of the most exciting freeway chase scenes in all of cinema. The conflict sparking all the chaos resides in Neo's pursuit of the Keymaker, a complex program who holds the key to Neo's rendezvous with the Architech. Flying to LA from his home in New York to meet with the Wachowskis, veteran actor Randall Duk Kim left an immediate impression, landing the role of Keymaker. "I was so excited... The first *Matrix* blew me away. I watched it over and over." An obvious fan of what the Wachowskis aspired towards and achieved, Duk Kim speaks of his work on *The Matrix Reloaded*.

words brady fiechter

play: I was just flipping through Cinefex today, and they had detailed that freeway chase scene, where you and Carrie-Anne Moss zip around on the Ducatti. That looks like it was so incredible demanding.

Randall Duk Kim: It was fun! Brady, I've never had so much fun in all my life. It was a hoot to do, that entire sequence. I know Carrie-Anne was nervous having to do that scene with a passenger, but I felt completely safe. I felt like a 12-year-old kid on an incredible thrill ride.

Making that whole movie must have been a thrill ride.

The experience for me was just childlike. The joy of it all. The pure, pure, utter creative joy of it. This experience is very special to me, and I'm very proud to be a part of something so magnificent and wonderful.

The main question I wrestled with...and something the brothers really couldn't answer for me...something I had to deal with: why a virtual human, something created by the machines? A mere semblance of humanity. What would fascinate such a character to want to go and help real human beings? Why would he put himself in danger to help the with their quest. The day I can answer that question is the day I discover what is so special about being human.

Now we're starting to brush with the philosophy behind the Matrix.

I love that the movie raises questions we've be wrestling with since the dawn of time. What is it to be a free human being? What is it to have the power to make choices? In our time, we take it for granted. Our President says we are freedom-loving people. What does that mean? How conditioned are we? Yet we look at ourselves as free. Do our genetics condition us? Are we culturally conditioned? Are we, as the Merovingian say, just part of the cause and effect of things? The movie is brilliant in at least raising those issues. I've hauled out all my old ancient philosophy books—Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the stoics and the like—just to, I don't know, refresh my thinking about it all.

You know, I did the same thing. And that's one thing about the movie. Whatever its flaws, whatever criticism it may receive, the movie did inspire thought. After Reloaded, my friend and I ran to our books and spent all night talking. The movie inspired a train of thought few ever do. That's sort of special.

It's very special. Besides giving us the fireworks, the astonishing special effects, the great martial arts sequences—which are simply amazing to begin with—it's the philosophic stimulation that is of great value.

The Wachowskis are obviously very unique directors. What was it like working with them on such an ambitious project?
I felt like I was playing with two little kids. And they made me feel like a little kid. There was this exchange… You know how little kids play; they create, they imagine, they imagine worlds, and they have great joy in imagining things. It was just a sheer joy to work with those fellas.

It must be so infectious to be around all that. So exciting.
To me, that's the nature of creativity. It's when we strain at it, and not like in that childlike way, then we fail. It's becoming a kid again that we can really create, that we can really tap into our imaginations.

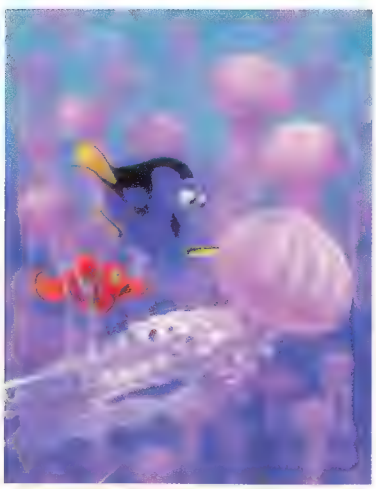
Tell me how you first got interested in becoming an actor.
I made my debut, when I was 15, in a production of Macbeth.

You seem to have started for the love the craft.
Of stepping into other worlds. Stepping in to another person's shoes. Had nothing to do with money, had nothing to do with celebrity. But the chance to discover something other than my life experiences. Going into a society of the past, for example. Becoming an ancient Roman. A warrior, a sea captain, you name it. Actually, in a story, becoming that, living it out in some way.

Which is exactly what you got to do with the *Matrix*.
And the world that they depict is just so incredible. It's multiracial, for one thing, which is where the globe is headed. play

"…why a virtual human, something created by the machines? …What would fascinate such a character to want to go and help real human beings?"

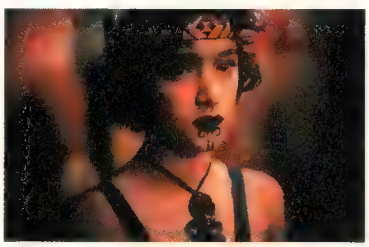
Finding Nemo
Buena Vista Home Entertainment
G



Pixar's *Finding Nemo* is an animated wonder, a delightful, exciting, clever and absolutely gorgeous display of what it takes to form one of the year's best films. When the physically weak yet infectiously determined Nemo gets kidnapped by a deep-sea diver to be passed on as a trophy display in an Aussie's exotic aquarium, the vast array of colorful sea life aid Nemo's widowed father in the search for his son's return. Sharks in sensitivity training—"fish are our friends"—are a classic moment. Sea turtles with a surfer's spirit provide big smiles and a breathtaking sequence where powerful sea currents become a wild transport. The neurotic and hopelessly forgetful motor-mouthed Dory (a sparkling Ellen DeGeneres) piles on the humor, joining the overly protective Marlin in the frantic search for Nemo. One moment after another terrifically entertains while providing endless visual miracles. Kids may be its inevitable target, but count on the intelligent flavorings from contemporary culture that continue to be pumped through the typically effervescent Pixar movies. Further charmed by Thomas Newman's gorgeous, evocative score, this one is rare magic.
Extras: Oh my! Disc 1—screensavers, visual commentary, deleted scenes, making-of, art gallery with narration, recording sessions, and on and on… Disc 2, made more for the kiddies—Pixar Short Film Knick Knack, Learning Fun With Mr. Ray's Encyclopedia. There's something here for every interest and taste, fully supported and always interesting.
movie: A
extras: A-

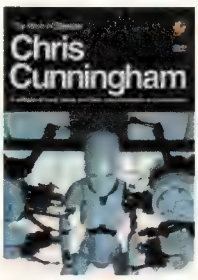
Whale Rider
Newmarket Films
PG-13

I can see why Roger Ebert went so far out of his way to promote this film. It's rare that a movie is so pure that you feel as if you're peering at real life through a looking glass rather than watching a film. *Whale Rider*



is a story of ancient tradition colliding with modern culture and the struggle to keep tradition alive in a time when its origins have long crumbled into the sea of lore. One such man, the elder of a small Maori village, awaits the birth of his eldest son's twins, through which the boy will carry on the ancient traditions and become protector of his people. But when the birth goes awry, the mother and son are lost, leaving only the daughter, and his world falls into ruin. *Whale Rider* is about two journeys, his and that little girl's (Pai, now 12), taking us along for a ride that not only reawakens the quelled human spirit but the beauty and awesome power of the planet we so heedlessly pillage.
Extras: The reason *Whale Rider* is so compelling really comes to life in the making-of documentary where we're introduced to the almost magical talent of Keisha Castle-Hughes, the actual village and the amazing amalgam of people it took to pull off such an engaging small film. We're also offered insight as to how special effects were achieved so well that watching the film I didn't even realized they used any, and given a passport into the amazing soundtrack. What a wonderful ride. -DH
movie: A
extras: B

The Work of Director Chris Cunningham
Directors Label
Unrated



Chris Cunningham has been working as a video and commercial director—check out his fascinating PlayStation spot starring a most bizarre-looking female—for several years now, creating a spectacularly abstract body of work that you really must see. Cunningham is in love with the morbid, the freakish, the intrigue of an unchecked imagination. His images are often bleak and dark, working off wild technique, striking lighting and obsessive composition. Aphex Twin's "Come to Daddy" is a twisted, grotesque work, but not all his videos are nearly this unsettling; Bjork's "All Is Full of Love" is one

of the most hypnotic, beautifully staged videos I've seen. As a makeup artist who was nominated for an Academy Award on *Alien 3* and drew the attention of the late Kubrick for work on *AI*, the director is currently broadening his talents on his first feature film, Neuromancer.
Extras: A disturbing 52-page art book, with choice interviews and a making-of feature.
disc: B+
extras: NA

Naqoyqatsi: Life As War
Miramax
PG

A spare, hypnotic Phillip Glass soundtrack goes necessarily far in supporting the churning sea of random, altered images stitched together to make up *Naqoyqatsi: Life As War*, the final part in a trilogy that began with director Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (*Life Out of Balance*) and *Powaqqatsi* (*Life In Transformation*). The movie is all visual, forging a message that

the world continues to be sucked down a black hole of cold, mechanical technology and detached, virtual suffocation. Its effect moves from interesting to banal to hypnotic, with moments of pure visual invention that invoke the depth of thought the movie wishes it could mine for the entire 89 minutes. Some of the digital and traditional photographic techniques used to manipulate the random images of war, commercials, stock corporate footage, athletes, rockets, smoke stacks and typing keys and on and on are flat and basic, while others show bursts of creativity. Holds your attention the first time.
Extras: Glass and Yo-Yo Ma discuss their music, NYU panel drone on as they interpret the film. Trailers of the first two films complete the list.
movie: B-
extras: C

Bruce Almighty
Universal
PG-13

In this lazily underwritten, woefully strained comedy about a bitter news reporter who becomes God for a spell, Jim Carrey desperately hams it up in a deadened effort to make us laugh at all the exploits becoming the Omnipotent One obviously affords. Carrey plays Bruce Nolan, who humiliates himself live on-air before eventually self destructing in a fit against God. When God (a miscast Morgan Freeman) goes on vacation, leaving duties in Bruce's hands as, I guess, his punishment, the movie begins its punishment. The puerile, unfunny jokes come fast and thick, forcing Carrey into a confused state of straight acting and a one-note shtick. Bruce delights in creating larger breasts, has his normally uncooperative dog pee in the toilet, spits locusts from his mouth at the local bullies, and drives the movie into its final tedium as he sets up amazing scenarios to capture on camera, catapulting to the top as a news-anchor sensation. *Bruce Almighty* supplies the occasional laugh, like when Bruce sends his sweetheart orgasmic through his saucy chatter alone, but it misses hard often and refuses to diverge from the same banal source for laughs. This material could have been hilarious, even a little provocative. Instead it ends up shriveling before the happy morality forced upon the ending
Extras: Director interview and assorted outtakes provide mild levels of amusement.
movie: C-
extras: C

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Gaming PC

ABS Ultimate M6 Gaming PC

www.abspc.com
$2399+

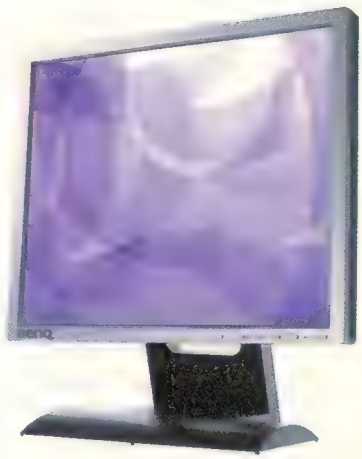
With the spanking-new AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 processor under its hood, this beast is our pick for best desktop gaming rig this holiday season. The system not only shows off killer 32-bit performance but is more than ready to tackle the new 64-bit applications that will start to roll out next year. Combined with the new GeForce FX 5950 Ultra card and the new Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS (7.1 Channel Support) this is pure gaming nirvana. In all of our benchmarks, the M6 performed beyond our expectations—it even bested PCs that cost twice as much.

Rotating LCD monitor

BenQ FP991

www.benq.com
$699

Combining great value with excellent features is the FP991. Featuring 19 inches of viewing goodness, the FP991 allows users to switch between landscape and portrait viewing modes with the press of a button. And with a max resolution of 1280x1024, 300 nits of high brightness and 2.5ms signal response time, it's perfect for gaming. Plus it'll look cool on your desktop.



Wireless network adapter

Nyko Wireless Net Extender

www.nyko.com
$129

Problem: Your high-speed connection is in a different room than your game console (or other Ethernet-compatible devices). Solution: Nyko's Wireless Net Extender. Quite simply, the Net Extender connects your DSL or Cable Modem from anywhere in your house, and comes ready with included Ethernet cables. It's plug and play; no configuration necessary. What could be easier?

Holiday Gift Guide

gear special

In 2003, we have seen the most compelling of products that cover the full breadth of the industry. We've seen PDAs and cell phones merge to create one of a kind devices. Once only considered "enthusiast" gaming PCs are now must-buys. Graphics cards are getting faster and cheaper. Are we excited about all of these changes in technology? You bet we are. To prepare for the 2003 holiday season, we sifted through piles of the latest and greatest cell phones, gadgets and personal productivity devices, compiling a list of must-have products for the person who "has everything." Whether you're looking for a high-end gaming rig or something to beef up your desktop, we've got you covered.

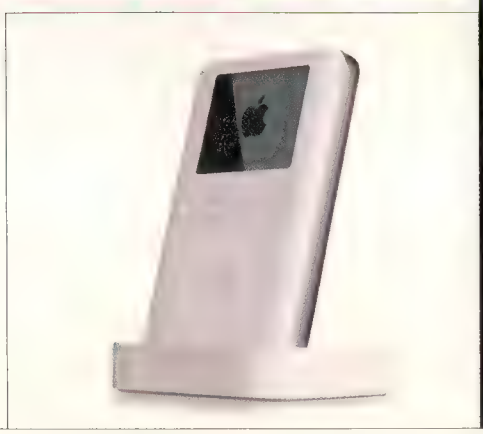
words tom ham

Sony Clie PEG-UX50

Why: It's the best PDA out there.

Details: With built-in Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, digital camera and a wickedly cool clamshell design, the PEG-UX50 is the ultimate in PDAs. With its horizontal 480x320 pixel orientation, this latest Clie looks more like a mini-laptop than PDA. You can even flip and rotate the screen like a tablet PC. Measuring 4.1 by 3.4 by .75 inches and weighing in at a mere 6.2 ounces, the PEG-UX50 can go anywhere with you. With the latest Palm OS 5.2 software, users are able to access thousands of applications and software. Oh yeah, you can also listen to MP3s and watch video clips via memory stick. Pretty slick.

Price: $699.99



Apple iPod

Why: Because it's great.

Details: Apple's elegant iPod has certainly captured the imagination. Sure, there are other hard disk-based mp3 players out there, some with higher meg-per-buck, but do you know what any of them look like? Thought not. The iPod epitomizes the typical Apple product: simple, refreshing, classic, beautifully made.

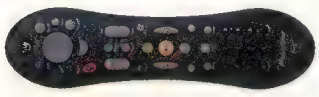
Price: $299-499

JVC GR-DVP9 Mini-DV Camcorder

Why: Your girlfriend won't see you filming her.

Details: Small enough to fit in your shirt pocket, this bad boy has 540 horizontal lines of resolution and sports light-gathering capability—which gives you brighter pictures with less noise. Not only is the picture quality excellent, it doubles as a digital camera with a 10x optical and 200x digital zoom. From 640X480 to 1600X1200, the GR-DVP9 has got you covered. Together with a 2-inch LCD monitor and a host of video editing tools, for the price, the GR-DVP9 is worth every penny.

Price: $1,299.95



Pioneer DVR-810 TiVO+DVD R

Why: Like peanut butter and jelly, TiVo plus DVD burning is a match made in heaven.

Details: It had to happen sooner or later, and Pioneer are the first to the punch. TiVO has revolutionized the way many of us watch television. All it lacked was a way to permanently store your favorite programs. Let's face it. When your TiVO is bursting at the seams with every episode of Nick and Jessica, you'd hate to have to delete one to record the latest episode of *Mama's Family*. Now such worries are a thing of the past, as you can burn your archival quality shows for posterity with this beauty from Pioneer. Also available in high-end Elite form.

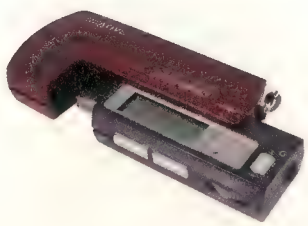
Price: $999

Creative MuVo NX

Why: So you can download your music and go in seconds. Plus it looks cool.

Details: USB flash readers are all the rage and Creative has taken their award-winning MuVo to the next level. The NX features a blue, backlit LCD that displays full song information, track number, play time and play mode. There is even an EQ setting. The 128MB version can hold up to eight hours of music and up to 16 hours of live audio via the built-in microphone. Transferring music is easy as drag and drop.

Price: $149.99



Handspring Sprint Treo 600

Why: You're sick of carrying around a PDA and a cell phone.

Details: Is it a camera? Is it a phone? Is it a PDA? It's all of the above. This world phone not only supports multiple email accounts, but Photo Caller ID, web browsing and as a built-in speakerphone. At its core is a 144MHz ARM processor and 32MB of RAM. Performance was exceptional. The 2.5 LCD inch screen supports 3,375 colors and is incredibly bright. Utilizing Palm OS 5.1.2H, it has all of the required PIM applications so users can sync up with Outlook or Lotus Notes. And with the built-in keyboard, the Treo 600 is perfect for on-the-fly instant messages and email.

Price: $599.95

Alienware Area 51m

Why: Because you want to play any game you want on the road (or in bed).

Details: Talk about performance. The Area 51m sports a 3.06GHz Pentium 4 processor, 1 GB of memory and a 16.1 Ultra XGA display. What makes it so cool? The graphics card. Under the hood comes an Nvidia FX go5600 Module with 128MB DDR. Advanced vertex and pixel shaders coupled with over-the-top horsepower will make your games shine at any resolution. You can even upgrade the graphics chip down the line.

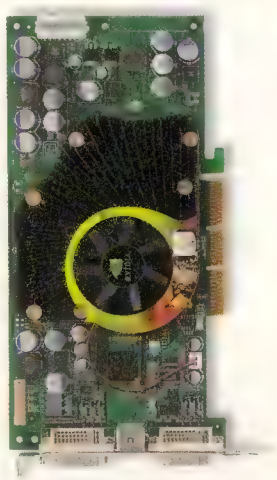
Price: $3,625.00 (each system price will vary dependant on options)

Motorola V600

Why: You always wanted to upgrade your phone. Now's your chance.

Details: Not only is the V600 sexy as hell, it's packed with awesome functionality that makes it one of the best new phones this year. Key features include a built-in camera (with 2X digital zoom), a 64,000-color screen (the brightest and clearest by far of any phone) and quad band technology. The best feature of this baby? Bluetooth capability. Corded headsets? Fashion faux pas. It's all about the cordless.

Price: $200 - $300 (prices will vary dependant on carrier)



Nvidia GeForce FX 5700 Ultra

Why: So you can play all the latest games.

Details: Featuring the new NV36 chip, the full-featured GeForce FX 5700 Ultra is the perfect graphics card for folks who want awesome performance but don't want to break the bank. Supporting higher clock speeds and enhanced processing, the 5700 Ultra outperformed our tests over the comparable ATI Radeon 9600 Pro. The 5700 Ultra clocked in at 475 MHz and 900 MHz DDR2 memory speeds. Translation—freaking fast. The addition of a 128-bit DDR2 memory interface is a sweet improvement as well. Looking for a mid-range video card? The 5700 Ultra is all you need.

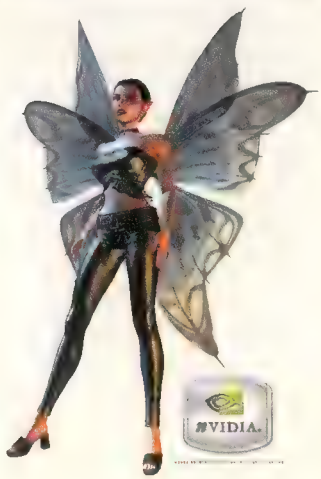
Price: $199.95

Nostromo SpeedPad n52

Why: Because you're getting owned online.

Details: With first-person shooter games becoming more complicated and intense, newbie players need all the help they can get. Enter the SpeedPad n52. Basically combining all the functionality of a keyboard and gamepad into one device, the n52 makes the sometimes daunting task of assigning keys an easy exercise. With 104 programmable functions, eight on-the-fly views and an instant diagonal control, you'll get that much-needed edge during gameplay. Best feature? The 360-degree mouse wheel, which lets you instantly attack from any angle. The extra row of keys is a nice touch too.

Price: $39.95



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Hair metal makes its triumphant return (sans hair) with these four plastic-pounding headbangers: Brooklyn Von Doom, Skinny Gawz, DJ Bonez and Franklinstein Fright. Press one of their many presets and they'll either spew a phrase or jam in unison...solos included! Like, no way! No...*way*!
www.geospaceplay.com

Kung Fu Chaos

Argonaut's hilarious Hong Kong action film spoof now has its own toy line, immortalizing one of the Xbox's most underrated games! Candi Roll, Captain Won Ton, Chop & Styx, Master, Monkey, Lucy Cannon, Ninja Fu Hiya, Shao Yu and Xui tan Sour all make the scene!
workshoptoys@aol.com

Rod Squad

More craziness from Work Shop Toys: Demolition Driver, Major Damage, Heat Seeker and...the Rod Father!

Rock Star Gamers: Staind

words lucas mast

Few bands today are able to achieve sustainable success. A band might be able to put out a hit single or two, but by the time their sophomore effort is released, they are clinging to musical life support and their fans have moved on to the next big thing. For Staind, the opposite seems to be true—fans have been gobbling up their releases like hotcakes, allowing their recent album *14 Shades of Grey* to go platinum and keeping their single "So Far Away" at the top of the charts for over 6 weeks. Guitarist and founding member Mike Mushok took time out of the band's busy touring schedule to chat with Play about the whirlwind that their life has become since forming in 1995.

Play: Congratulations on the success of *14 Shades of Grey*. Does success ever begin to sink in?
Mike Mushok: We are always surprised when an album does well. We know deep down that it is the best album we can put out at the time once we leave the studio, but it is always encouraging when the fans seem to agree. We all feel very fortunate that we get to do what we love for a living and will never take that for granted.

Play: To what do you attribute your continued success?
MM: I think that our music has a message that resonates with the fans. Aaron's [Lewis, lead singer/songwriter] lyrics touch people deep down, and combined with good, solid backing music we believe that we put out a quality product and encourage our fans to take a chance and give it a listen—and it seems that we are all on the same page in that respect.

Play: Are there any difficulties that go along with the success?
MM: Let me first say I am grateful every day for our success. That having been said, I was at Michaels Arts and Crafts with my wife the other day and these girls followed us around the store—that would not have happened if I was not in Staind. I think it is the people who follow you and point and don't say anything that are the creepiest. But since MTV doesn't play many videos, rock musicians are not as easily recognized today. But MTV2 and Fuse do a great job playing videos—so I guess I have them to thank for any stalkers I encounter!

Play: Looking back, can you identify a turning point in your career?
MM: While everything we do is preparation for the future, I think there were at least a few events that allowed us to move forward in very positive directions. The first was getting a chance to play for Fred Durst and to open for Limp Bizkit on tour. Additionally, when "Outside" and "It's Been Awhile" came out, we got a lot of airplay and opportunities to expose the music to a wider audience.

> "We all feel very fortunate that we get to do what we love for a living and will never take that for granted."

Play: I noticed that you included a special DVD along with the CD. Was this to encourage people to actually pay for the CD instead of downloading it off a P2P site?
MM: I think if there is anything good that can come from the decrease in record sales and the downloading controversy is that bands are now forced to be creative and give fans more than simply an album. I was a kid once, and had no money and would get dubbed cassette tapes from friends—I can certainly understand where people are coming from and I want to ensure that they are getting a good value for their dollar when they buy our album.

Play: And unlike some other groups, you put a lot of effort into your live show…
MM: For us, putting out an album is really a device and an excuse to tour—to really get out and play for the fans and put our heart and soul into the music and see that our music is actually reaching people—even touching them. The irony is that music is a fairly selfish undertaking—we play because *we* want to—and the fact that there are others out there that like it is a wonderful side benefit.

Play: Are you involved in Aaron Lewis' label 413 Records?
MM: Aaron asked me to be involved and help him look for talent to sign. We just released Lo Pro's album, principally to sell at shows since they are touring with us, and it has gotten some really good initial feedback. It is a wonderful opportunity for them to build a grassroots following and get exposure via the thousands of fans that we get to play before every night across the country. I am constantly listening to demos that people send in, and I can tell you that there is a lot of good music going on out there—a lot of garbage as well, but there is hope.

Play: What else have you been listening to, besides demos?
MM: No matter what I listen to, I always seem to gravitate back to the classics. Lately, I have been listening to a lot of Led Zeppelin, something I have recently rediscovered.

Play: What do you like to do when you are not on the road or in the studio?
MM: I am a pretty simple guy. We have been on the road so much lately, I just like to stay home, spend time with my wife, and play with my dog. I also was a carpenter for a while during college, so I like to do some handyman-type projects around the house.

Play: You have a degree in electrical engineering. Is it rare is today's world to find educated rockers?
MM: I have been playing guitar since I was six, but I also have a mom who has a PhD and is an educator. I tried supporting myself with music gigs after high school and was experiencing some let downs, and my mom asked if I wanted to go to college. So I went to Western New England College and ended up graduating with a 3.7 GPA in a pretty hard major. And since I was working as an engineer while the band was in its early stages, I could pay for some expenses and allow us to play some pretty important gigs that did not pay much—or at all.

www.staind.com
www.lo-promusic.com

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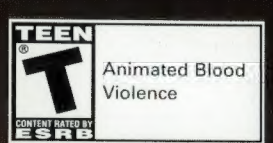

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